DIABLO

LORE COLLECTION

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SHORT STORIES

CRUSADER:

THE END OF HER JOURNEY

ROBERT BROOKS

I

Gauntleted hands shoved open the inn's front doors with a bang. Swirling ribbons of sand flowed into the common room. Reiter's broom went still. He stared. In the fading twilight, all the boy could see was a silhouette standing in the doorway.

For a long moment, only the unending drone of the sandstorm broke the silence.

The figure stepped forward. Heavy armor rattled. A white tunic spilled down his chestplate, bearing a strange symbol. But it was the weapon that held Reiter's eyes. A short length of black chain connected a handle with an evil-looking spiked weight. The man even carried a massive shield. It was taller than Reiter. The armor shook the inn's wooden floor with each step. The figure's head, encased in a thick helm, turned to look at the boy.

Reiter was too terrified to run. So he just stared. And waited.

The man raised a hand to his helm and removed it. Flowing brown hair fell to his shoulders—*her* shoulders. Reiter's mouth dropped open in shock. *That's a woman!* He had never seen such detailed, frightening battle armor in his life, not even among the elite merchant guards that passed through town, and those crews were always men. At least, that was what Reiter assumed. He hadn't actually met that many.

The woman coughed, and sand tumbled free from her armor. Had she been walking around in this sandstorm? Insanity. She turned her eyes toward Reiter and smiled. It was a gentle, kind expression. "Let me guess," she said. "You're the son of the innkeeper?"

Reiter swallowed and nodded. "Father?" he called, not looking away from her.

A grunt echoed from the inn's second floor. "Ya, boy? Yeh done sweeping?"

"We have a guest."

"Not'n this weather, we don't," he said, coming down the stairs. "What're you—oh." His gutter accent vanished in an instant, replaced with warm speech, the language he saved for guests. "My apologies, good sir—madam, I mean. I wasn't expecting any new arrivals. Not with this storm, anyway." His charming act was spoiled a bit by his nervous glances toward the woman's armor. "Welcome to the Oasis Inn. Are you two looking for a room?"

Two? Reiter shifted his gaze. He hadn't even noticed the woman's companion, a girl wearing simple clothes. She was younger. About Reiter's age, in fact. The lack of armor seemed to have left her a touch windblasted, though. Specks of sand clung to her hair. Reiter decided he could overlook that.

The woman gently rested her shield on the floor. "I hear you have a fondness for books and that you lend them out to your patrons. Is that true?"

Books? These two had trudged through a sandstorm for *books*?

"You heard true, madam," his father said. "Some say my inn has the finest library in Kehjistan. Outside of Caldeum itself, of course."

She smiled. "In that case, we would like to board here," she said. "On one condition: you don't need to call me madam. My name is Anajinn."

"Of course, ma—Anajinn! Plenty of room at the Oasis Inn today." Reiter's father spread his arms warmly. "Not too many people as brave as you two, to be traveling in this weather."

The second new arrival laughed. "Brave. Sure. Getting caught in a sandstorm. I can already hear the poets rushing to compose sonnets of our courage." Reiter smiled at her. She met his gaze and, after a moment, gave him a polite smile back.

The armored woman grinned. "Perhaps we were taken a bit by surprise. Perhaps we would have been here a few days earlier if a certain apprentice could keep up."

"Perhaps a certain apprentice wasn't the one who wanted to explore every cavern in the desert," the apprentice said.

"Perhaps." Anajinn removed one of her gauntlets and upended it. A small waterfall of sand cascaded to the wooden floor. Reiter frowned. He was going to have to sweep that up. "We managed to be productive, in any case," Anajinn added in a wry tone.

The innkeeper cocked his head, but no further explanation was forthcoming. "Well, I'm sure you two must be thirsty, and the Oasis Inn always has plenty of cool water stored," Reiter's father said. "Reiter? Can you bring two cups for our guests?" He paused, looking at the boy. "Reiter?" He snapped his fingers sharply.

Reiter jolted upright, pulling his gaze away from the apprentice. "Water. Yes, Father." He grabbed two cups and opened the hinged door on the floor, lowering dippers into the water casks.

He was glad to be hidden behind the counter for the moment. The armored woman's companion… Reiter struggled to keep a grin suppressed. The apprentice had lighter, almost blond hair, longer than her master's, and her eyes were radiant. The way her chin curved elegantly to her neck… She had even given him a smile. A cool smile, but a smile nonetheless.

She likes me, Reiter thought.

Reiter handed the two women their cups. They both downed their contents in single gulps.

He watched the younger guest. She gave him a questioning glance. He looked away.

"Follow me upstairs, and I'll show you to your room," Reiter's father said.

"Actually, I'd like to see the library now," Anajinn said. "Do you have any books discussing the city of Ureh?"

In short order, the woman had shed her armor and followed Reiter's father to the library, while her apprentice stayed in the common room. "Can you spare a cloth and a small bowl of water? I might as well start cleaning," she said.

"Sure," Reiter said. He collected the items from behind the bar.

The apprentice called out, "On second thought, don't mind the cloth. I'll use a bit of my shirt."

"It's no problem. We have plenty."

"You won't get the cloth back. You won't *want* it back. I'll have to burn it when I'm done," the apprentice said.

"That's fine," Reiter said, returning with the bowl and the cloth. He gave her his most winning smile, the kind that made the daughter of the trade goods storekeeper down the road bat her eyelashes at him—Bea was her name. Reiter put the local girl out of his mind. "We have plenty."

"Thank you," the apprentice said. She had an odd cleaning technique. She dipped a couple fingers into the bowl and let only a few drops wet the fabric. She began scrubbing the chestplate, a thick slab of metal with intricate etchings and workings.

Reiter sat down next to her. "Need help?"

"No, thank you."

The boy nodded and leaned over. "What do those symbols mean? They look like Zakarum markings."

"They are."

Reiter was impressed. "Really? Your master is a paladin? I've seen lots of paladins come through town before. She's a lot prettier than most paladins." And then, feeling that the time was right, he added, "So are you."

She gave him another cool smile. "Anajinn is not a paladin."

Reiter nodded again. He didn't really care. "Staying in town long?" he asked.

The apprentice kept the cloth moving in tight circles on the armor. "Probably not. Up to her. Maybe a few days, at most." She scowled at a stubborn stain and splashed more drops of water on the cloth. Gingerly, she pressed the damp rag against the armor. After a moment, she seemed satisfied and renewed her scrubbing.

"I heard her say she's looking for Ureh. Is she a treasure hunter? We get all kinds of treasure hunters here," Reiter said. He carefully leaned back in his chair, slouching a bit, trying to appear relaxed and confident.

She considered him. "Treasure hunter? I've never thought of it that way before. The term almost fits." With one last look at Reiter—and his posture—she went back to work, shaking her head.

"My name is Reiter. What's yours?" he asked. She smiled but said nothing. He waited. The silence lengthened. *Fine.* Her name wasn't really important anyway. "If she's not a paladin, what is she?"

"A crusader," she said.

"Oh, right. A crusader. I knew that," Reiter said. She gave him a sideways glance. Reiter's smile slipped. She seemed to know he was lying.

Another period of quiet. Reiter fidgeted.

Still, she was talking to him. That was the first step, right?

A month ago, a group of guards had hired rooms in the inn and spent most of their time swilling the cheapest drinks they could find. Reiter had enjoyed their company. One of them, a swarthy, sweaty man with a stained tunic and patches of rosacea spattered amid his thinning hair, had taken it upon himself to teach Reiter "the ways of the world." Most of the conversation had focused on how to get "any little pretty"—his words—to agree to a night of companionship.

Get a girl to talk with you, and she's interested. Get her to smile, and you're halfway there, the guard had told him in loud, drunken whispers. His cloying breath had seemed to take up residence in Reiter's nose. *Make her think you have a lot in common, keep her smiling, and you win. If she stops smiling, change the subject. Compliment her.* Reiter had been amazed it could be so easy.

"What's your name?" Reiter asked the apprentice again. No response. "Do you do a lot of cleaning for your master? My father makes me clean all the time." Still no reply. Reiter

continued. "My father always tells me that we need to have the cleanest inn in Caldeum's Rest."

"Interesting," she said. She scraped at another troublesome stain with her fingernail, then jerked her hand away as though it had been burned, muttering to herself. She pushed down hard on that spot with a dry section of the cloth.

Reiter watched her closely. She wasn't smiling anymore. He changed the subject. "If you've been walking around for a while, you could probably use a hot bath. We have plenty of tubs in the back, and I can heat some water for you. If you'd like."

"Maybe later," she said.

"It would be no trouble," he insisted, and then said, casually, "I wouldn't even mind joining you."

The apprentice set down the cloth and fixed Reiter with a glare. "Excuse me?" she said.

Reiter felt heat rush into his face. Desperately he racked his brain for an explanation. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I forgot some people don't consider that modest. It's not unusual here in the desert. Helps to have someone else help clean the sand out of hard-to-reach places." It only made things worse. The silence, once again, stretched…

"Here," he said, suddenly reaching for the cloth. "Let me help with that." He quickly dipped it into the water. His hand brushed her hair, and he felt a thrill run up his arm. Without hesitation, he placed the rag against the armor and began scrubbing.

The apprentice gasped. "Wait—"

When Reiter touched the wet cloth to the stain, everything seemed to happen at once. The apprentice yelled. The bowl of water flipped. The table *underneath* the bowl flipped. Smoke, vile smoke, smelling of sulfur and festering blood, filled the air. Reiter screamed and tumbled out of his chair. The apprentice took the chestplate and flung it out the door in one smooth motion. It arced over the balcony, into the sandstorm.

Just before Reiter landed on the floor, he saw a ball of green flame rapidly expanding over the chestplate, disappearing in a flash. Just after Reiter landed on the floor, the table fell on top of him, pinning him down, knocking the wind out of him.

Yelling, crying, Reiter struggled to push the table away. Strong arms pulled the weight off his chest. Anajinn, the crusader, stared down at him with concern.

Reiter's father stumbled into the common room, wide eyed. "What happened?"

"Excellent question," Anajinn said. The crusader turned her gaze from Reiter, to the chestplate lying outside in the sandstorm, to the apprentice. To the last, she gave a hard look.

To everyone's shock, the apprentice began laughing. Sobs of pure mirth shook her body, and she had to sit down to keep from collapsing on the floor. Reiter's father looked outraged. "What in the name of Akarat happened to my son?"

The apprentice wiped away tears and said exactly what Reiter hoped she wouldn't. "He offered to bathe with me. And then he tried to help clean the armor to apologize for it." More peals of laughter filled the common room. "I'm sorry, Anajinn. I wasn't expecting him to put water onto dried demon's blood."

"He did what?" Reiter's father's eyes darted between his son and Anajinn. Reiter shrank back. "Dried *what?*"

Anajinn was still looking at her apprentice. "Truly?" she asked. The apprentice stifled her laughter long enough to nod. "How much?" The apprentice made a gesture with her fingers the size of a large flea. "Good." Anajinn breathed a sigh of relief. "So no harm should have been done."

Reiter's father seemed caught between concern, anger, and fear. "What harm? What did my son do?"

"Nothing terrible, as it turns out," Anajinn said. "Do caravans heading to Caldeum sometimes disappear? Yes? I don't think they'll be having problems for at least a few years. Just before the sandstorm hit, we encountered a… nest. These creatures in particular don't enjoy the presence of water. For obvious reasons. The desert made for a happy home." Frowning, she picked up another piece of her armor, a leg guard, and examined it closely. "I

had thought we cleaned off everything dangerous, but it's hard to be thorough when you're blinded by sand for three straight days." She bowed toward Reiter's father. "I humbly beg your forgiveness. Even if the danger was slight, the oversight was mine."

Reiter saw his father's mouth moving soundlessly. Finally, he cleared his throat. "I… see. No harm done. I also apologize. For the behavior of my son," he said, glaring down at Reiter.

"Oh, no apologies are necessary," Anajinn said immediately. "If my apprentice is taking a shine toward your son, it's fine with me."

The apprentice sighed. "That's not—"

"No need to explain," Anajinn interrupted her, grinning openly. "Young love. So beautiful. Flowers blooming in spring. Desert roses and such. You know, there's nothing in the crusaders' oath that prevents you from—"

"My oath? No," the apprentice grumbled. "My sense of good taste? Yes."

The uproarious laughter of his father chased Reiter back into the inn's main storeroom. He made it his personal mission to avoid the two women for the rest of their stay, which lasted about a week.

He was mostly successful. At one point, the apprentice sought him out and attempted to apologize for her last remark.

"Anajinn's sense of humor is rubbing off on me. We can be… biting… toward each other from time to time, but that's no excuse. I'm sorry for what I said."

Reiter mumbled and waved her off. She and her master seemed crazy anyway. *Demon's blood.* He shook his head. That must have been a lie. Unreasonable to think otherwise.

"Strange woman," Reiter's father remarked after they left. "Bett'n she has salt, though. Called herself a crusader. Interesting story. She's from the swamplands. Came ovah to the desert to search for some religious thing, I guess. Yeh should've asked her about it. Fast-natin' stuff."

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

II

"Make sure to sweep," Reiter's father said weakly. A coughing fit shook his frail body. He clasped both hands over his mouth, but Reiter could still see phlegm leaking through the gaps between his bony fingers. "Inn… clean…"

"I will, Father. Finish your soup," Reiter said.

"Can't… don't like the taste…"

"Bea made it especially for you this morning," Reiter said with more patience than he felt. "You need your strength. Finish it all."

He closed the door firmly and went back to the common room. The midday meal had been served hours earlier, and there were only three customers left at the tables: the two tired merchants, discussing the prices of Westmarch wine, and the religious fellow, quietly paging through a thick book. Reiter walked behind the counter. His wife was sharpening one of the cooking knives.

"Would you mind taking my father some more tea?" Reiter asked. "He's not doing well today."

"Spare a little honey for him?" Bea asked with a sympathetic look.

Reiter sighed. Honey had grown expensive over the past few months. The merchant from Tristram was late. Reiter hoped he would be back by next week, but if he wasn't, the Oasis Inn would run out soon.

"I don't think so." At her disapproving glare, he quickly added, "If we don't have enough honey, our customers will be unhappy and our reputation might suffer. My father wouldn't want that." Bea's expression grew darker. "I'm sure he would tell you himself to skip the honey if he knew the situation. This inn is everything to him. It's his legacy." Reiter fidgeted for a moment, then held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. Give him the honey. A little bit."

If anything, her glare grew even more heated, but she made the tea—with a generous dollop of honey—and disappeared up the staircase.

Reiter sighed again. Even though he had given in, he was sure she would bring it up later.

She seemed to delight in making him feel low for no reason.

The door of the inn swung open. Footsteps echoed through the common room. Reiter let his gaze linger on the staircase a moment longer and then began his welcome speech. "Welcome to the Oasis Inn, good sir. Can I help you?"

"'Good sir'? At least that's better than 'madam,'" an amused female voice said.

Reiter turned. The new visitor was clad in heavy armor, the same heavy armor he had seen maybe eight or nine years ago. Helm, chestplate, shield, flail, white tabard embroidered with a Zakarum symbol—it was her. His mouth fell open.

The crusader? "I… my apologies, madam," he said without thinking.

She chuckled easily. "'Madam.' My name is simply Anajinn."

"My apologies… Anajinn," Reiter said. Had that been her name? She looked different than he remembered. Her hair was lighter and longer, her jaw more defined, her nose a bit smaller. Strangely, she also seemed younger.

He could feel the stares from the others in the common room. It was a little comforting to know he wasn't the only one intimidated by her appearance. "Do you need a room? Is your apprentice staying with you?" Apprentice. His stomach clenched. Images of a flipped table and a troublesome stain surfaced in his mind. Embarrassment welled up, and he banished the memory quickly.

"I'll only need a room for one. I have not yet found an apprentice," she said. "I would also like to revisit your library."

Reiter led her out of the common room, toward the library. "Certainly. We have the finest library in…" He trailed off with a frown. *Not yet found an apprentice?* Anajinn had one when she last visited. Then again, Reiter seemed to be remembering the entire ordeal incorrectly. He dismissed the thought. "Finest library in Kehjistan. Outside of Caldeum, of course."

Anajinn kept pace with him, armor clanking heavily with each step. "I've been to nearly three dozen outposts around this desert, and I believe you and your father are right," she

said. "You do have the largest library I've ever encountered outside of a big city. In fact, I've never seen its like in a town like this."

"My father's idea," Reiter said. "Caldeum's Rest is small, but almost everyone heading to and from Caldeum along the southern route stops here. The oasis, you see. Last chance for water before you cross the nasty part of the desert. My father noticed that there were plenty of academics and scholars and religious pilgrims who didn't want to stay at the tavern down the road, so he created something inviting for them." *A waste of time and effort*, Reiter didn't add. There was far more coin to be made in wine and spirits than in providing a quiet study room for destitute students. "He let merchants know he was willing to buy any books they had."

"Your father. He is well?"

"He is dying," Reiter said.

Anajinn inclined her head in sympathy. "Is there something I can do to help? Can I see him?"

"He isn't lucid these days. I wouldn't want to upset him with any old memories."

Anajinn looked at him for a moment. "As you say." The library door was just ahead.
"Are many of the books new since I last visited?"

"I think so," Reiter said. He hadn't read any of them himself. He held the door open. "Here we are."

"Thank you," she said.

As she stepped back, a bit of her hair brushed Reiter's hand. A bit of her *blond* hair, he realized. It all rushed back to him in an instant—the master, the brown hair, the name.

"You… you're not Anajinn. You're the apprentice!"

He got a wry smile in return. "Not anymore," she said.

"But… the armor… You said your name was Anajinn!"

"That *is* my name," the woman said.

Reiter's confusion turned to anger. It felt as if she was having a laugh at his expense. Again. "That was your master's name!"

"And it is my name." She still smiled. "Is it really so strange?"

"*You—!*" Reiter lowered his voice. "You talk like you *are* her," he hissed. "Were you trying to trick me? Didn't you embarrass me enough last time?"

"I meant no disrespect. I am a crusader. I am Anajinn," she said. "As my master was. As her master was before."

"You were *all* named Anajinn?"

"When I took up my master's shield, I took up her cause and her name," she said.

"Took up her shield? Why? What happened? Is your master…" *Dead?* Reiter suddenly didn't want to know. He hurriedly changed the subject. "Are you still looking for books about the city of Ureh?"

"No," she said. "I'm seeking information on the lost memoirs of Tal Rasha."

"I… see." Reiter didn't. "I'll leave you to it, then." He hastily made his exit and returned to the common room.

Bea was waiting. "A new guest?" Reiter nodded stiffly. "Who was she?" Bea asked.

"She visited here a few years ago. I think she might be insane," he whispered. Bea gave him a skeptical look.

Reiter cleared away the dishes from the merchants and took a fresh pitcher of water to the lone man sitting at another table. *She* is *crazy,* Reiter thought, filling the man's glass to the brim. *Nobody sane takes someone else's name and tries to live their life. It's not reasonable.*

Coldly he wondered how long it would take to sell off all the books in the library after his father died. It might be best if this crusader never had reason to return.

A severe voice interrupted his thoughts. "Innkeeper." It was the man whose glass he had just filled. The religious fellow. "Who is that woman? The one in the armor."

"I'm honestly not sure," Reiter said. It was the truth. "She is a strange one."

The man firmly closed his book. On its cover was one of the familiar symbols of the Zakarum faith. It was remarkably similar to the sigil the crusader bore. Come to think of it, this man had arrived wearing armor of his own, not entirely dissimilar to Anajinn's. "She's been here before?" the man asked.

There was an edge to his voice Reiter didn't like. "Once. Years ago. I was just a child," he said, hoping he sounded dismissive. "She seemed odd to me then. Not terribly reasonable, but harmless." Then he wondered if he had misjudged this man's intent. "Is… is she a friend of yours?"

"No." Ice was warm compared to his tone. "Not reasonable, though. Interesting. What about you, innkeeper? Do you consider yourself reasonable?"

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

"Really? Why would a reasonable man shelter a heretic?"

Reiter stepped back. "What?"

"I saw the symbols on her armor. On her tabard. Those signs are not meant to be decorative trinkets." The man stood up, giving Reiter his first look at his powerful stature. "I am a paladin of the Hand of Zakarum. I root out corruption and heresy wherever I find it." He jabbed a finger into Reiter's chest. The innkeeper nearly fell over. "I do not sense the Light

within her. I sense something else. She cannot be allowed to dwell within your inn if you serve the faith. Do you, innkeeper?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Reiter squeaked.

"Then why do you tolerate her presence?" the paladin said.

Reiter quaked beneath the looming man. He had never seen a paladin so angry before. "I give courtesy to all who claim the Light's favor. How could I have known what she is?" An idea occurred to him. "She called herself a crusader. I assumed she was faithful to your order. Forgive me," he said, dropping to his knees, prostrating himself. "I fear my ignorance has led me to grave sin. Can you forgive me, good sir?" He held his breath.

There was a long, long pause. "A crusader?" Reiter stole a quick glance upward. The paladin wasn't even looking at him. "Why does that name…?"

"Say the word, and I will have her removed from my inn immediately, good sir,"
Reiter breathed.

The paladin seemed lost in thought. "Yes. Tell her to meet me out front. I will examine her intentions myself. And if need be, I will deal with her." He strode up the stairs, taking his book with him.

Reiter stood uneasily, wiping sweat off his forehead. *This is good,* he told himself. Anajinn could sort out her own issues with the paladin. Outside. As far away from the inn as

possible. He could hear the paladin stomping around upstairs. The clanking sounds meant he was putting on armor. Reiter shivered.

But he didn't want Anajinn to know how scared he was. She had already seen him humiliated at the hands of a little water and blood. No, he decided. He would simply tell her to leave. The rest was unimportant. This was Reiter's inn—or it would be, once his father died—and he wanted her gone. That was reasonable.

Anajinn was reading through a thick tome when he entered the library. "Anajinn, or whatever your name is, you need to leave now." She glanced up at him and turned a page, tracing along the text with her gauntleted fingers as she read.

"I heard some angry words out there," she said.

"There's a man… a paladin. He says you're a heretic," Reiter said.

She laughed. "I suppose he would." Her eyes never left the book. Reiter stammered incoherently for a moment. "Did he threaten to kill me?" she asked.

"Well, not… Yes." Reiter tried to make his voice firm. "I think he means to kill you. He's waiting outside for you now."

"Nice of him to send you to warn me."

She continued to read. Reiter shifted uncomfortably. "Aren't you going to… face him?"

"Eventually. If he's still there," she said. "He might be waiting a while. I have a lot of reading left. Maybe he'll find something better to do."

Reiter felt utterly helpless. Dragging her out seemed like a bad idea. Still, he pressed forward. "Anajinn, I want you to leave my inn. Right now." She didn't immediately respond, and Reiter exploded. "What is *wrong* with you? What is in that book that's more important than a man trying to kill you? Why in the Hells have you come back to my inn?"

Anajinn sighed and set down her book, sitting up straight. Her armor clacked together lightly. "Your father asked my master—"

"The real Anajinn? The first one?" Reiter interrupted without thinking.

She didn't seem to take offense. "Her, yes. But she wasn't the first. Anajinn began her crusade a couple centuries ago," she said. Reiter blinked at that, but she moved on. "Your father asked all about our crusade. He didn't share that with you?" Reiter shook his head, lips pressed together. "Then I'll be brief. I'm searching for something to save my faith."

"From… what?"

Anajinn's smile was sad. "Decay. Corruption."

"So why does this paladin hate you so much?"

"Would you be happy to have someone tell you your faith is flawed at its core? Doomed to rot and cause untold suffering and pain?" She sighed. "I don't think this paladin outside is of

high rank. Knowledge of the crusade is suppressed to all but the leaders of his order. If he were one of them, he would not wait patiently."

"What would he do?"

"He would level your inn to kill me." Anajinn's expression hardened. "I don't know whether I can talk sense into him. If I can't, I'll likely need to leave town. So until I'm ready to leave, I'm going to finish my reading."

"But he threatened to kill me too!" There. It was out.

A pause. "Did he?"

"Well, not in so many words…"

Anajinn cut him off. "But you felt threatened." It wasn't a question. Anajinn closed her book.

"Then I will leave immediately. I don't want you to feel at risk because of me.

"But this book," she said, holding it up. "Would you be willing to sell it? I can pay a fair price."

Reiter stared at her.

***

Amphi could feel his patience slipping away with each passing heartbeat, like grains of sand tumbling through the neck of an hourglass. Wind whipped through the road in front of the inn, grinding sand against his armor.

"Crusader," the paladin muttered. He could not recall where he had first heard the name. Perhaps he had read it? Studied it as an acolyte in Kurast? No. He was certain of it. So why did the name trouble him so? Crusaders were not friends of Amphi's order. He knew that much, but even that knowledge felt incomplete. The symbols on her armor were carefully, reverently rendered. No obvious blasphemy. She was not a clown, nor was she one of the actors who painted Zakarum symbols on their bodies and pranced around in low taverns.

Cennis. That was a name Amphi hadn't thought of in many years. One of his best friends in the Travincal temples, the boy had had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Maybe that was it. Cennis had snuck into the study of one of the Hand of Zakarum's elders one night and stolen a book. He had excitedly told Amphi about all the things he had learned, things the students had never been taught. He was even a little frightened. He had found hidden knowledge, lost crimes. Fractures within the faith. Strangely, Cennis disappeared soon after, and Amphi…

What had happened to Cennis? Amphi grew angry. It was a familiar feeling. Every time he thought back to his childhood, hatred and rage flowed into his mind. It was as if the

memories were buried in a toxic cesspool, covered in vileness. Soon, his curiosity faded in a whirlwind of fury and—

The crusader. Amphi could feel his patience slipping away with each passing heartbeat like grains of sand. He pressed his hands to his head and blinked. What had he just been thinking about? A childhood friend? That was it. He put it out of his mind. There were more important things to focus on.

"You wanted to speak with me?" The voice brought Amphi back to the present. There she was.

Amphi spotted people darting indoors up and down the street. Travelers and inhabitants alike were taking cover. Wise of them, Amphi judged. He abruptly realized that the woman was giving him a strange look, her head cocked to one side. "Are you feeling well, paladin?" she asked.

"Tell me your name," he said harshly. "Tell me who you are, if the evil that compels you—"

"My name is Anajinn. I'm a crusader." She raised an eyebrow. "And I'm hoping we can have a calm conversation."

"I don't negotiate with evil. I smite it where I find it," Amphi snapped.

"Good," Anajinn said cheerfully. "Then we have something in common. But I believe there's no need for smiting today. What troubles you?"

Amphi drew his sword in a swift motion. Her gaze didn't waver, which only angered him more. "You are a heretic, are you not?"

"I am not," she said.

"You claim my faith?" he roared. "You claim obedience to Zakarum?"

"Not in the way you mean," Anajinn said. Pausing, she regarded him with sympathy. "We have much in common, paladin. *Much* in common. We both want the same things."

Amphi spat on the ground. Why were this woman's words gnawing at his insides? He could barely keep himself from attacking her here and now. The urge only grew stronger, yet he resisted, pressing on in a tight voice. "Those symbols you wear. They are sacred. You have no right to wear them."

The crusader shook her head. "That is not what troubles you, is it? Tell me what you know of me."

"You desecrate my faith," he said.

"How?"

"*I... don't... know*," he growled.

"Here's what I know," Anajinn said. "I know that evil can thrive anywhere. Anywhere at all. Even among those who claim virtue and justice. Especially if they are not watchful."

"Be quiet," Amphi whispered. His anger was slipping away.

"I know that the path that led you to where you are is filled with regrets," she continued. "I know that you value righteousness, and I know you've come to suspect that something is wrong within the faith. I know that you've struggled to understand it, and most importantly, I know that you are strong, because you've not truly succumbed to evil yet."

"Please stop talking," Amphi begged. She was right. About all of it. There were endless moments when he questioned the actions of his order. His thoughts were in a tumult.

"I know you've felt the Light's glory, or else you would have discarded your oaths," she said. "And I know that you've felt it in the fields, among the world, among its people… but never in Travincal. Never in the temples of your order. And I know that you know why. Deep in your heart, you know. Even if the answers have been hidden from you."

Pain blazed between his eyes. He silently lowered his head. A storm raged within. He sank deep in its fury and looked for truth.

What he saw was a stone. Darkness surrounded it.

Something gave way. His turmoil vanished in an instant.

Hatred. Hatred took its place. Pure, naked hatred.

Amphi pointed his sword at the crusader, feeling clarity of purpose for the first time since laying eyes on her. He raised his hands above his head and summoned the power of the Light. "I am done with words, heretic. Die!" he roared.

Anajinn simply nodded. "So be it." She smiled sadly as Amphi cast his might down on her.

***

Reiter couldn't make out the paladin's words, but there was no mistaking how the expression on his face turned ugly. The innkeeper's son continued to peer through the front window of the inn. A moment later, Bea joined him.

"Get back," he hissed. "It's not safe."

"You first," she said. Reiter glowered at her, but a flash of light drew his gaze back to the street.

Bea inhaled sharply. Reiter flinched. The paladin had summoned… something… that glowed like the midday sun. The man held it above his head, shouted at Anajinn, and then cast it down on her.

Just before it landed, Reiter saw Anajinn smile.

There was a tremendous sound, and a great, billowing cloud of fire flared where Anajinn had been standing an instant ago. Of the crusader, there was no sign.

For the briefest moment.

Light crashed down from above, a bolt of pure power and radiance. Anajinn crashed down with it. The paladin didn't see it coming. And then he saw nothing at all.

Reiter shouted in fear and stumbled backward, throwing up his arms to shield his eyes from the blinding light. When he lowered his hands, the sharp purple shape of the bolt still danced in his vision. Blinking fiercely, he squinted. Anajinn stood alone, calm, flail slowly swinging at her side.

Of the paladin, there *were* signs. Many of them, scattered across a great distance. The sand surrounding Anajinn seemed damp.

Reiter felt himself beginning to tremble. Bea stood with her hands clasped over her mouth. Reiter stared numbly as Anajinn carefully placed the flail's shaft in her armor's securing loop, and then with one final look toward the inn, Anajinn walked west, down the road and out of Caldeum's Rest, with the setting sun as her guide.

She was accompanied by total silence. The town watched her go with bated breath.

Reiter heard noises from upstairs. From his father's quarters. Reiter sprinted to the second floor and opened the door. "Father, are you well?"

His father hadn't been so alive in months. He was staring out the window, eyes following Anajinn as she vanished into the desert. "She's the one, right? From years ago! I wish she had come up for a visit. I knew she had salt. She took proper care of that bastard, eh?"

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

III

"I am not a heretic. I've walked in the faith my entire life." Reiter fought to keep his voice steady. Three impassive faces stared back at him. He couldn't tell if they believed him. "I am but a humble servant who hopes to live by the words of the wise prophet Akarat. I'm sure I stumble from time to time, but I—"

The smallest of the paladins, a thin, balding man with a pinched face, interrupted him. "That is precisely our concern. You seem to have stumbled," he said, shoving the innkeeper back. "You knowingly gave shelter to an enemy of the faith, and one of the righteous died trying to rectify that. One of our brothers."

"No, no!" Reiter gasped as the paladin slammed him against the wall. The wooden slats creaked under the impact. "When your brother asked for my help, I gave it to him. Without hesitation!"

"With Amphi dead, we only have your word for that," the second paladin said. "But what we do know is that, of all the buildings in this Akarat-forsaken outpost, the heretic chose to rest at yours."

"I cannot see what is in a person's heart when they step through my door," Reiter pleaded. The first paladin's hand squeezed his shoulder. Hard. Reiter squawked in pain. "I've not held anything back! I've told you everything I remember about her, and she's not returned for years!"

The third paladin broke his silence. "He did tell us her name," he said. "Anajinn. That is more than we knew before."

The first paladin shook his head. "I still think he's hiding something." He kept Reiter pinned against the wall with one hand and lifted his other in front of the innkeeper's face. A shimmering light danced between his fingers. "I want him to understand how serious I am." Reiter fruitlessly tried to squirm out of his grip. Sparks leaped from the paladin's fist. One landed on Reiter's nose, and he screamed as pain stabbed through his skull.

"Enough, Cennis," the third paladin said. "If the reports are true, if the crusader is in the area, we will find her. She can't hide in the desert forever without visiting this oasis. There's no need to torment this poor fool any longer."

"Do *not* question me. I am in charge." The first paladin slowly pushed his hand closer to Reiter's face.

The second paladin firmly gripped the first's arm. "Enough." The two stared at each other for a long moment. Reiter, blinking away tears, feared they would turn on one another. This was far less frightening than the thought of both turning on him.

"Fine," the first paladin said, and he released Reiter. The innkeeper dropped to his knees, clutching his left shoulder and wheezing, snot dripping from his nose to the floor. "Perhaps you're right. The news out of Travincal, the temples… Maybe I am a bit hasty, but I will not apologize."

"There is no need," the second paladin said. "He *did* give her shelter, however unwittingly. I assume he won't repeat that mistake."

Reiter shook his head desperately. "No, never."

"Good," the first paladin said. "And if you catch a glimpse of that foul being ever again, you will inform us without hesitation." He leaned down, placing himself nose to nose with the innkeeper. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes!"

All three of the paladins turned together and left the inn. There were no customers in the common room. Reiter was alone, gasping and weeping.

A hesitant voice spoke. "Are you all right, Father?"

Reiter gave one final sniff, wiped his eyes, and turned to face his daughter, Lilsa. "Of course. I'm fine. Just some sand in my eyes. Makes me look like a fool sometimes." He stood up and forced himself to smile. She was barely four, though she often seemed smarter than most children twice her age. "Those nice men decided to stay somewhere else for the night."

She bit one of her thumbnails before answering. "They didn't seem nice to me."

Reiter made himself laugh. "I suppose they weren't." He wiped his eyes again. "Where's your mother?"

"Out back with the nice ladies wearing the shiny metal," Lilsa said.

Her words, delivered with total innocence, made him freeze in mid-step. Reiter felt all of the blood drain out of his face.

It wasn't possible. It couldn't be.

Quickly he knelt down, getting face to face with his daughter. She flinched back at his expression, and he tried to smile again. "What nice ladies, Lilsa?" She drew away from him. Maybe his smile hadn't been terribly convincing. "Which ladies, Lilsa? It's important," he repeated.

Her eyes were wide. "Two ladies. I think one of them's hurt," Lilsa finally said.

Reiter gently picked Lilsa up and strode through the storeroom, opening the back door. The blistering desert sun assaulted his senses, but there was no mistaking what he was seeing. Three women sat together on the long wooden bench behind the inn.

Sitting on one side was Bea, carefully handling a damp cloth. On the other side sat a teenage girl Reiter had never seen before. In the middle was…

… her.

"What are *you* doing back here?" Reiter hissed in a panic, setting his daughter down.

"She's injured, Reiter," Bea said firmly. "Be calm."

"I don't care! My inn was just invaded because of her." Reiter turned on Anajinn, who had her head lowered and was breathing slowly. "You have brought your enemies down on my inn, crusader, and—" Reiter went silent with a frown. The dirt underneath the bench was wet. Blood dripped from beneath her armor. "What happened?"

The younger woman, the teenager, answered. She was about as old as Anajinn—this Anajinn—had been when Reiter first met her. "We ran into a bit of trouble out in the desert yesterday, and Anajinn forgot to dodge." She carefully removed the crusader's chestplate. Reiter gasped. An angry, gaping tear reached from one side of Anajinn's abdomen to the other. "Wounds from demons' blades don't close easily."

Reiter felt his daughter clutch his leg. "Demons?"

Anajinn spoke in a slurred voice. "You don't need to worry about it. It was taken care of."

The younger woman snorted. "*You* were almost taken care of. I need to try healing you again." She knelt in front of Anajinn and opened a thick book, an old tome written in ancient script. The apprentice marked out a place on a page and showed it to Anajinn. "Should I start here?"

"Yes," Anajinn said. "Focus. Concentrate. Reach out with your faith."

Reiter looked between the two with confusion. "I don't understand; what are—" Bea's hand sliced through the air. He quieted.

The crusader said nothing further. Her apprentice began to speak, reciting an old law of the Zakarum faith. Reiter frowned. What would a sermon accomplish here? Though he had to admit, the words of hope weren't unwelcome. The day suddenly seemed a bit brighter, a bit warmer. Inviting. Reiter lifted his gaze in wonder. It was as though the Light was shining down on them all.

The apprentice finished the passage and closed the book. "Done," she said. Anajinn raised her head and stood up. She wobbled on her feet for a moment but waved off the apprentice's offered hand. She rolled her shoulders and stretched. Her shirt was still stained red, but there were no signs of fresh blood.

"Well done," Anajinn said. The apprentice beamed.

Reiter blinked. The crusader's wound was gone. As though it had never existed. "Did… what…?" He gathered himself. "It doesn't matter. You need to leave right now."

"Reiter," Bea said in a warning tone, but he shook his head and went on.

"I have a daughter; I have a pregnant wife; and I have an inn to protect," he said. "There are three paladins—I hope only three!—in town, and they know you're in the area. Leave my inn in peace. Please."

Reiter expected an argument. He expected Anajinn to object. But she simply nodded and wearily strapped her chestplate back on. "I'm sorry they've troubled you. Most of their hearts used to be in the right place, but in the past few weeks, they have grown truly lost."

Her apprentice handed her a sheathed sword and her flail. The weapons hung naturally off her armor, and finally, Anajinn picked up her shield. "Be very wary of anyone who hails from Travincal. Something dramatic has happened there. They may be unstable."

"I know that, crusader," Reiter snapped. "One of them was a heartbeat away from taking my head off. They blame me for what *you* did! They hold me accountable for that other paladin's death."

Anajinn stopped moving. "Do they?"

"Yes!" Reiter leaned toward the woman, his face growing red with anger and embarrassment. "You came to my inn. Not anybody else's. Mine. They think that makes me guilty. They told me they thought I was hiding something."

"Where are they now?" Anajinn asked quietly.

"They're someone else's problem. It sounded like they wanted to search the rest of Caldeum's Rest." Reiter pulled back, satisfied at the look on her face. "So. You've caused me enough trouble. I want you to leave my inn. Now."

Anajinn and her apprentice exchanged unreadable glances, and then the crusader let the edge of her shield slide back onto the sand. She shook her head. "We can't leave."

"Good," Bea announced. "You two need to rest before going anywhere."

Reiter's mouth fell open. "Bea!"

She gave him a challenging stare. "We have plenty of room. We have no customers. We can keep them safe for a couple nights of sleep."

"The paladins!"

"What about them? They left," Bea said. "These two came in from the south. The desert, not the main road. Nobody saw them. We'll set up cots in the second storeroom and pile boxes of turnips and dried beef in front of the door. If the paladins return, they won't know there's a room there. You can even invite them to search. That's what we did when the bandits showed up last year. You thought it was a great idea then."

"There's a bigger problem," Anajinn said. Bea and Reiter both turned to look at her. "The paladins will return, and it won't matter whether they see us."

"What? Why?" Reiter asked.

"They already blame you." Anajinn's voice was cold. "They are not in their right minds. There is a very high chance that when their search of the town yields nothing, they will take out their anger on you. Or others. They are fueled by hatred, not divine purpose. You and your family are in danger, innkeeper."

"Because of you!"

"Yes," she said. "And I will not leave you and your town to their mercy. If you don't want me to protect your inn directly, my apprentice and I will set up camp in the desert, out of eyeshot. If we hear or sense—"

"Oh, don't be absurd. You'll be fine in one of our storerooms," Bea said. She cut off Reiter's splutters of rage with a sharp look. "It won't be trouble. Let me talk with my husband for a moment."

Reiter allowed her to lead him and Lilsa back inside, out of the crusader's earshot, before erupting in harsh whispers. "Are you out of your mind, Bea? Those paladins will kill us!"

Bea waited until he finished. "Lilsa, can you go up to your room for a minute?" she asked. The girl disappeared up the stairs. Bea rounded upon Reiter, her tone filled with contempt. "That's what you want your daughter to see? Her father sending two people—one of them wounded!—into the desert because he's scared of what three strangers will think?"

"That's completely unfair," Reiter said. "Anajinn has brought death on our heads, and no matter how much those men hate her, they wouldn't possibly kill us just because she stayed here six or seven years ago. Not unless they actually *did* find her here. Think of Lilsa. Think of the one on the way." Reiter laid a gentle hand on Bea's swelling stomach. "Our children need Anajinn to leave. Now. Be reasonable."

Bea looked down at his hand and then raised her gaze to meet Reiter's. "So you're willing to believe those paladins over Anajinn?"

"As I said, I'm sure Anajinn is just overreacting," Reiter said.

She removed his hand from her belly. "Those men threatened to kill you. She has been nothing but kind and honest." Her eyes narrowed. "I don't know why you dislike her so much, but I believe her. If the paladins might still harm us, we need her here. To protect our children. How's that for *reasonable?*" She turned but offered a final parting shot over her shoulder. "Whatever your father's faults, he was not a coward. He would be ashamed of you right now." She stepped outside to speak with the other women.

Reiter felt sick. *She doesn't understand. She'll get us all killed.* He could hear armor rattling outside; the crusader was preparing to enter. He fled to the common room. He didn't want to see her. He needed to think.

My father would be ashamed? Reiter frowned. His father certainly once had a fondness for charity, which Reiter had never shared, but above all he was a practical man. A reasonable man.

Though Reiter had to admit Bea was correct about one thing: the paladins might come back. He shivered.

Maybe, just maybe, Anajinn and her apprentice could stand against them. He had seen what she had done to that other paladin all those years ago. Reiter hadn't understood it, but he'd seen it.

But she had been healthy that day, he reminded himself. Rested. Confident. Today was different. She was near death only minutes earlier. No matter how powerful her apprentice was or how effectively they fought together…

She can't beat them, Reiter decided. All it would take was one surviving paladin, and his family would suffer the consequences.

Inform us without hesitation, the paladin Cennis had told him.

Reiter stood up. That was the way out, he realized with a rush of hope. The paladins might be unreasonable until they found Anajinn, but once they did, they would undoubtedly calm down. And if Reiter was the one who led them to her, they'd know he was sincere about not wanting to help her. They'd probably even praise him for his forthrightness.

But Anajinn… she and her apprentice would die. *Better them than my family,* he told himself firmly*.* He quietly slipped out of the inn.

Caldeum's Rest was not a large place. Reiter was confident he could find them. He strode west. *Inform us without hesitation.* His calm strides quickened. Then he began to jog.

Soon, he was running.

***

The blacksmith didn't slow his stroke on the anvil. "I understand, good sir." Sparks flew each time his hammer landed. "If a woman in strange armor enters—"

"If *any* woman enters," Cennis snapped. "The heretic may try to disguise herself. She would seek to trick you and lead you into sin."

"Yes, good sir," the blacksmith said. "If any woman enters, I should come find you or one of your brothers." He picked up the thin slab of red-hot metal with tongs and examined it closely. With a grunt, he laid it back on the anvil and began hammering the edges again. "Was there anything else you needed, good sir?"

Cennis's fingers twitched. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, blacksmith," he said softly.

"Of course," the blacksmith said. He gave the paladin a cursory glance and went back to work. "Whatever you say, good sir."

There wasn't an ounce of mocking in the man's voice, but Cennis felt anger bubbling up anyway. He stepped closer to the blacksmith. "Am I distracting you? Am I keeping you from your important work?"

"No, good sir, I'm listening," he said. He met Cennis's eyes again and blinked, seeing something dangerous there for the first time. With a heavy sigh, he tossed the steel haphazardly into the nearest quenching barrel. Steam rose with an angry hiss. "I apologize. What else do you need to know, good sir?"

"What were you making?" the paladin asked lightly.

"A barrel scraper," he said. "The innkeeper down the road needs one."

"The owner of the Oasis Inn?"

"That's him."

Cennis nodded calmly. "I understand." He truly did. He understood more than this fool would ever suspect. *This entire town is close-knit. They live in sin together.* They deserved punishment together.

A wonderful idea occurred to him. He glanced around; his fellow paladins were elsewhere, interrogating other people. Good. "And if you had already seen the heretic, you would tell me, right?"

"Of course, good sir," the blacksmith said.

"I don't believe you."

The blacksmith frowned. Cennis casually raised his right hand, as though inspecting his gauntlet. Wiggling his fingers, he leaned over the anvil. The blacksmith took an instinctive step back. *Afraid of a servant of the faith? What are you hiding?*

"I want you to know how serious I am," Cennis said. He clenched his fist, and the Light filled him. A glowing shape appeared between the two men. "I'm sure you make fine barrel scrapers. What do you know about hammers?"

The blacksmith stumbled backward. Even his sinful eyes could not mistake the hammer of pure Light suspended in midair. Oddly, the man's gaze darted around the room. Cennis

followed his look but saw nothing of interest. Maybe the shadows seemed a bit strange. Growing and shifting. Cennis remembered when a blessed hammer of Light would banish all shadows. That felt like a long time ago. A lifetime ago. When he was a boy.

Cennis held a hand to his forehead and frowned. His head hurt. The hammer wavered and vanished. Thinking about his childhood brought pain and interrupted his concentration. He grimaced and shook away the notion. A lifetime ago. Not relevant now. The hammer reappeared.

"Good sir." The blacksmith's voice trembled. "I—"

Cennis lightly swung the hammer. The anvil exploded away from him. The blacksmith clutched his middle and fell, screaming, a piece of metal lodged in his guts.

"I'm sorry, *good sir*," Cennis said. "You were saying?" The look on the other man's face was delicious. Total helplessness. Total fear. Cennis held the glowing hammer mere inches from the blacksmith. "Why don't you tell me what you really know about the heretic?"

The blacksmith begged. He wept. He swore he knew nothing. He cried out for Akarat's mercy. *A little late for that.* What sort of lost creature would continue to lie? What had he seen with his eyes that he refused to mention? Cennis hesitated. Perhaps stronger measures were needed. He reached out, just a bit, toward the blacksmith's face, and…

The other man's cries went silent. His eyes, wide open, reflected the hammer's Light in an interesting way. In a pure way. Unblemished by iris or pupil.

Then red crept in, ruining the perfectly white orbs, pooling beneath the man's eyelids. Cennis watched, fascinated. Twin pops, unexpectedly loud, sent crimson flowing down his cheeks, joined by tiny streams of white fluid. Still, the man didn't scream. His tongue was paralyzed by sheer terror.

Cennis abruptly realized what he had done. This man would likely be unable to answer questions for hours, if not days, he chided himself. *A waste.* Shaking his head, the paladin reached out with the Light and removed the blacksmith's tongue with a quick tug. He didn't even need to use his hands. The pink flesh flopped onto the sandy floor, and finally, the blacksmith screamed, a tortured, wordless sound. Cennis let him. This was a fine idea. The crusader was in the area; he was certain of it. But what sort of shelter could she find if the entire town was filled only with the blind and the mute? It was no less than they deserved for harboring a heretic years earlier. Yes, he decided, he would go door to door—

"Akarat save us." A breathless whisper at the smithy's entrance. Cennis turned calmly. The innkeeper. *That* innkeeper. He stared at the blacksmith, who continued to wail.

"Akarat cannot save you," Cennis told the innkeeper. "Nobody can."

"I…" The innkeeper's eyes jerked between Cennis and what remained of the blacksmith. "I came to tell you… as you commanded… without hesitation…"

"Oh, I doubt that," Cennis said sadly. He hooked his finger, and a shimmering loop of Light encircled the innkeeper's throat. The paladin cinched it tight, very tight. The innkeeper began to choke. "The woman returned, didn't she? And you waited to tell me. I know your

kind. You waited." He hooked his finger again, and again. More loops of Light cinched tightly, pinning the innkeeper's wrists together, pinning his elbows together. The gasping turned into whispered screams.

Cennis stepped outside, tugging the innkeeper along. "Brothers!" he called out. "Brothers, the sinner is here!" After a moment's thought, he raised his hands again and showered sparks across the smithy's roof. Smoke rose instantly, tiny flames joining together into large sheets of fire. He nodded with satisfaction. His fellow paladins sometimes felt squeamish about treating evil as… decisively… as Cennis preferred, so he would ease their minds of the knowledge. Fire was wonderful for cleaning up loose ends.

The innkeeper was forcing words through his constricted throat. "Family… mercy…"

"Hush now," Cennis said.

***

"Honey, don't touch the nice lady's shield," Bea said gently, lifting Lilsa into her arms. Patting her daughter on the back, Bea frowned down at Anajinn. "You're not planning to sleep in that armor, are you?"

The crusader raised her head off the bed and smiled. "Looks silly, doesn't it?" With a deep sigh, she lay back. Her apprentice sat on a stool at the foot of the bed, pouring tea into three cups. Anajinn shifted her weight, and the armor softly clinked together.

It did look silly. Bea suppressed a grin. "I'm pretty sure you'll sleep better if you take it off,"

she said. Lilsa giggled into her ear. "See? My daughter agrees."

"She's probably right," Anajinn said. Her smile looked sincere, but fatigue pinched her eyes. Bea suspected this wasn't the first time she had been close to death recently. "But if those gentlemen return, I may need to act quickly."

Bea went quiet. Lilsa was staring in fascination at the way the lamplight was playing off the armor. "I cannot believe that they would actually mean us harm. Serious harm." But the paladins' words to Reiter had carried through the inn's walls. She had heard their anger. Could she really be sure what they were capable of? "I grew up here. I've seen all sorts of people come and go. Paladins weren't rare. They always seemed so nice when I was a child. In recent years, they seem…" She hesitated. "Do you know what's happened? Why they're so troubled?"

The apprentice gave Anajinn a questioning look. Anajinn was silent for a moment. "Their darkness has come to the surface. That darkness is what drives my crusade," she said.

"You hate paladins?" Bea said.

"Not at all," Anajinn said. "Our faiths share the same roots. I see them as brothers and sisters. Lost, but family." The apprentice handed her a cup of tea. She sipped it before continuing. "Centuries ago, a very wise man noticed that the core of the Zakarum faith had been corrupted. Infected. It was subtle, but elements of evil had crept deep into our foundations. Judging by the news out of Travincal, that evil is no longer creeping but has

been leaping and shouting openly for the past few years. It has literally become the home of Hatred. Whoever destroyed that place did the world a favor."

Travincal had been destroyed? Bea shifted uncomfortably on her feet. She hadn't heard that news, had heard only that something terrible had happened there.

"There are good people among their order. But those inclined toward evil have overwhelmed the righteous, I fear," Anajinn said. "The destruction of their haven might unbalance the rest."

Bea accepted a cup of tea from the apprentice. Her hand trembled only a little. "And your crusade is to eradicate them?"

Anajinn shook her head. "My crusade is to eradicate the evil that corrupts them. To search for something that might cleanse the faith. I thought it was out in that desert a few days ago…" A tired smile appeared. "We cleansed something, to be sure. It wasn't the faith."

"My bowels, maybe," the apprentice mumbled.

Bea was shocked at the language, but the crusader simply laughed. "Seeing a few demons leap from the shadows is an excellent way to cleanse those. We took care of the stronghold, and that's never a waste of time. I'm not sorry we made the trip." Anajinn frowned as though something unpleasant had just occurred to her. "Where is your husband, Bea?"

"Probably sulking upstairs in his study," Bea said in a mischievous whisper. "He does that when he doesn't get his way."

Anajinn did not smile back. "I haven't heard any footsteps upstairs. Or anywhere else in this inn. Can you find him, please?"

"I suppose so," Bea said. Still holding Lilsa, she stepped out of the small room. "Reiter?" she called.

Lilsa's voice joined hers. "Faaaaaather!"

There was no answer. Strange. Bea wandered into the common room and called Reiter's name again. Silence. "Where do you think your father is?" she quietly asked Lilsa. The girl shrugged her shoulders. Bea walked back to the crusader's room. "I guess he left for a moment. Anajinn, why—"

The crusader was already on her feet, gripping her shield and flail. Her apprentice shucked a short sword out of its sheath.

"I fear," Anajinn said, "your husband has made a terrible mistake."

IV

The cord of Light—or whatever it was—around his neck didn't ease a hair when the paladins forced him to stop. Reiter could hear his skin beginning to sizzle from its heat. His hands scrabbled in vain behind his back, bound by the wrists.

His eyes… his eyes. *Akarat, my eyes!* Darkness everywhere. The paladin had crooked a finger at him, and pain had blazed through his head and destroyed his vision.

Reiter was blind. Utterly blind.

"It is good that you came to us with your sin as quickly as you did," the lead paladin whispered in his ear. "We will send you to the judgment of Zakarum without too much pain. At least you have given me extra practice. Your eyes will remain in your head." A hand shoved Reiter to his knees. He wheezed helplessly, only able to suck a tiny thread of air down his throat.

He could hear the three paladins spreading out in the street. Reiter desperately tried to choke out some final plea—*spare my family; take the crusader, but spare my family*—but all that escaped from his mouth were incoherent rasps. He fell onto his side. He strained his ears, hoping to hear a door or a window open anywhere down the street. No, he realized. There would be no help. Not from anyone else in this town. It wouldn't be reasonable to step into this fight.

The lead paladin called out in a clear, strong voice. "*Heretic!*" After a moment, he tried again. "Heretic! The one named Anajinn! I am Master Cennis. In the name of the Zakarum faith that you choose to defile, surrender immediately for judgment."

Heavy footsteps sounded from the inn's wooden balcony. Reiter could see nothing but darkness, but he could clearly hear her. She was stepping out of the door without hesitation.

"Innkeeper, know this," Anajinn said. "I will do what I can to ensure your family's safety." Her voice was filled with pity and sadness, not with the anger and recrimination he expected.

"A waste of time," the lead paladin spat. "Anyone who harbors a heretic—anyone—must face the same fate as the heretic," he added with a leering grin.

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Doors and windows slammed shut up and down the road. Other than that, there was no sound anywhere else in Caldeum's Rest. The whole town held its breath.

Anajinn eyed the three paladins. The one in the middle, the one standing above Reiter, seemed to be in charge. The other two stood ready, but she thought she could see hesitation in their eyes. It was to them that she spoke.

"Your leader is speaking of murdering an innkeeper, his wife, and a young girl. And the wife is bearing another child," she said. Contempt dripped from every word. "*Master Cennis* would kill them without a moment of regret. Have you truly fallen so far? Have you *truly* sunk to his level of evil?"

That sparked another torrent from Cennis, angry words about justice and righteousness and heresy, but she didn't listen. She watched the other two. They stole glances at each other.

Indecision.

Guilt.

They knew who Cennis was. They knew what kind of monster he had become. They almost certainly never admitted it to each other or to themselves, but they knew. They knew, deep within their bones, that what was about to happen was *wrong.*

But as she watched, she saw the expression of one harden. The second soon followed. Only hatred remained in their eyes. Anajinn bowed her head. They did not like the idea; they did not relish the idea; but they would obey. They might regret their actions; perhaps this would even be the moment that could one day lead to their redemption. But the price of that redemption would be the lives of innocents.

The paladin continued to rant. Anajinn took in a very, very deep breath, allowing the air and the Light to fill her completely. It did not erase her fatigue. Exhaustion seemed embroidered across every inch of her body.

But the Light gave her strength. As it always did. As it always would, until she reached the end of her journey.

"So be it," she said, and charged.

And the Light whirled around her.

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A terrible and wonderful tone rang out. Bea flinched. Lilsa listened in silence, mouth open with awe. New noises arose, the sound of unearthly fury. Of battle.

"Reiter, oh no, Reiter," Bea breathed.

The apprentice led them behind the buildings along the town's single street, taking them away from the confrontation. Her short sword was in her right hand, point up. Her left hand had a firm grip on Bea's. "Keep moving," she whispered. Other residents of the town were fleeing into the desert, in ones and twos and small groups. They looked prepared to take their chances in the barren wilds rather than stay a moment longer.

"My husband, is he…?"

She shook her head. "Anajinn will not let him die as long as she lives." Another deep, echoing noise cascaded over the buildings. "And she still lives."

A tremendous crash cut off any further comment. Something—*someone*—smashed through the back wall of the inn, tumbling through the sand. Bea's breath caught in her throat. Someone had been thrown *through* the entire inn. Pieces of the roof began to collapse. It looked as if the building would soon follow. The figure skidding to a stop in the desert wasn't Reiter, but who—

"Into the alley," the apprentice said. "Quietly, now."

Bea allowed herself to be herded into the tight alley between two adobe walls. "Who was that? Are they dead?"

The apprentice stole a glance back around the corner. "It was one of the paladins, and no, he's not." And reluctantly, she added, "He's heading around the side. Trying to sneak around the fight, to strike Anajinn from behind." She looked down at her sword and then at Bea.

"Do you need to help her?" Bea asked.

The apprentice hesitated. "She told me not to leave you."

"We will stay out of harm's way," Bea said. Still the apprentice didn't move. "Will these men stop at killing your master? At killing my husband?"

"No," the apprentice said softly.

"Then go," Bea said.

***

Anajinn raised her shield and let the hammer glance off. The impact shook her to her bones. She spared a quick look through the hole in the inn. The paladin she had blasted away was beginning to rise to his feet. Not dead. She was more fatigued than she had realized. The blow should have put him down for good.

The other two paladins advanced relentlessly. The lead paladin, the one called Cennis, spun hammers of the Light at her again and again, while the other sent a continuous barrage of shimmering, bright bolts. She kept her shield high, intercepting each attack. When the second paladin rushed to within three paces, she lowered her shoulder, braced against her shield, and *pushed.*

A solid wall of power, of Light, met the charging paladin. Red mist expanded outward. When the Light faded, crimson hung in the air. Bones, only bones, cracked and fractured and dry, fell to the sand. Even the man's clothes had been scattered like dust.

Anajinn did not exult in his death. She simply turned toward Cennis and swung her flail. With a startled, angry cry, he leaped backward, flinging another hammer, which caught her across the right shoulder. Agony erupted, but she coldly ignored it.

The paladin hissed and squinted at what remained of his brother. "You filthy, interfering *murderer.* Spawn of evil."

"It'll be more pleasant for everyone if you stop talking," Anajinn said.

She suddenly dropped into a crouch and *pushed* against her shield again, but the paladin reacted faster than his brother had. He raised his arms and parted her blast with one of his own. His counterattack rattled her shield, but she was already moving forward, flail whirling over her head. He called another hammer to meet her weapon, but the crusader let her shield lead the way, focusing the Light in front of her as she stormed through his attack and bowled him over into the sand. Then she lashed out with her flail, and pure, bright power leapt forth like lightning.

The paladin snarled and lifted his hands. *Caught* the lightning. Sent it back at her.

She didn't even bother dodging. She let the Light skip across her head and armor without flinching.

"Devil." The paladin cursed. "Demon. Damned."

"The Light does not harm the righteous," Anajinn said, a cold smile touching her lips. "Can you say the same for the power you use?"

Enraged, he scrambled to his feet and flung himself toward her. Her flail and his hammer collided. The shock of the impact shattered glass windows along the town's main road. Anajinn stepped forward, ignoring her growing tiredness and—

—*pain*—

—she was in the dirt, face down. Gasping. Her shield was no longer in her grip. Rolling onto her back, she swung her weapon, sensing rather than seeing the follow-up blow coming. The spiked weight of her flail landed solidly on Cennis's right leg, in the gap between his armor. His hammer vanished only inches above her head, and he stumbled backward, bleeding and screaming.

Who had blindsided her? And with what? She tried to push herself to her feet, but her arms and legs trembled and gave way, and she flopped back into the sand. *This is bad,* she thought. Scorch marks crawled up her left side, and every breath scraped her throat. Burned on the inside. Burned *from* the inside. She swore she could actually feel her guts turning crispy.

Well, she thought. *That's new.*

Gritting her teeth, she strained to stand upright, ignoring the pain, the fatigue, the weakness. "You chose this life," she reminded herself out loud. Her voice sounded guttural to her own ears. "Embrace it. Curse it. Just don't regret it." Her master had told her that, long ago. *Keep moving.* She hefted her shield again and squinted down the road.

Bright lights clashed and sparked about a hundred paces away. The wounded paladin, Cennis, was gesturing wildly. The other surviving paladin, the one Anajinn had hurled through the building, was there. *So that's who blindsided me.* He was flinging power at someone else now, someone without armor and carrying a sword…

"Oh, you fool girl," Anajinn muttered. Her apprentice had a tendency to disobey orders. *Just like I did,* she thought wryly. But the teenager wasn't stupid. Inexperienced, but not stupid. If she hadn't joined the fight, Anajinn likely would be dead. The second paladin would have finished her off.

Anajinn saw the innkeeper, lying helplessly on the ground, bound by the paladin's power, and very near to suffocating, judging by the purple hue of his face. She knelt down and dispelled the bindings with a casual gesture.

Deep, hoarse gasps erupted from Reiter's throat, and he opened his eyes.

Anajinn flinched. His eyes had gone pure white. Blinded. Smoke rose from much farther down the street—the smithy, she guessed, shaking her head. She could only imagine what Cennis had wrought there. It was a problem for later.

"You're fine," Anajinn told Reiter. *I wish I could say the same for myself.* "If you can, stand up. You need to get out of the street." She looked up. Her apprentice was still holding her ground. Cennis was injured, and the other paladin was probably rattled from his trip through a building. They both fought unsteadily. Her apprentice was nearly dancing circles around them.

A smile tweaked Anajinn's lips. "Hurry, please." The innkeeper tried to speak, but the words emerged as frightened huffs. *I'm sorry,* he was trying to say. Anajinn patted him on the shoulder. She could see his guilt written on his face, even in his blank eyes. "They will not be kind if they find you. Hide well," she said. Finally, he was able to push himself into a lurching, unbalanced run, his hands splayed out before him.

"Hide well," Anajinn whispered. She had not told him to flee the town. She knew as well as any that most sane people wouldn't dare try to walk across the Kehjistani desert without a fully supplied caravan. A blind man, a *newly* blind man at that, wouldn't have a chance.

To keep Reiter and the rest of the town safe, the paladins had to die.

She could see Cennis limping as he bore down on the apprentice. The girl was darting in and out of the paladins' range. She had no armor, and she used her nimbleness to her advantage, scoring a small wound on the second paladin's arm while throwing up a wall of power to stop his attack.

Anajinn staggered into the fray, smiling grimly. What kind of master would she be if she let her apprentice have all the fun?

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"This way, Lilsa," Bea said. It was an effort to keep her voice calm, but she managed. They slid along the side wall of the trade house, edging toward the road. "Just a little farther."

Lilsa clung to her hand and looked scared, but she wasn't crying or shouting. "Is the crusader going to beat the bad men?"

"Absolutely," she said with more confidence than she felt. "Let's go find your father." She had seen Reiter stumbling toward the other side of the street. Fear boiled in the pit of her stomach; he had looked badly hurt and incoherent.

A thundering roar overwhelmed everything, and a long, drawn-out crash, filled with the sounds of snapping wood slats and crumbling walls. Bea froze until the din subsided, leaving only the fury of battle in the air.

She peeked around the corner, and her breath caught in her throat.

The Oasis Inn, her home, as well as the new apothecary next door, lay in ruins. A massive blow had taken them both off their foundations. Bea whispered a prayer. She thought she had seen the doctor and his wife flee the apothecary earlier. She hoped they had.

Across the street, through an alley, Bea saw someone stumbling around, feeling his way along the walls. *Reiter.* To get to him, Bea and Lilsa would need to cross the street in full view of the combatants.

They're going to wreck Caldeum's Rest if this goes on for much longer, Bea told herself. It seemed hiding behind a building would be no protection at all, judging by the power they were slinging around. Going was likely not much more dangerous than staying put.

She took a deep breath and scooped Lilsa into her arms. "Ready to go meet your father?" she asked. Lilsa nodded.

"Then let's go," she said, sprinting into the road.

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Snarling, Cennis continued to throw hammer after hammer at the two heretics. Again and again, the armored one blocked his blows and the younger one danced out of the way.

The girl suddenly stepped in and slashed. Her sword clanged off the plate on his forearm. Only by sheer luck did she miss taking his arm off at his exposed elbow. He let her jump back out of his range and formed another hammer. Behind her, this time.

The apprentice spun and raised her hands to ward off the attack, but Cennis let it fizzle and threw another hammer straight from his chest. She twisted her sword, and the hammer struck steel instead of flesh, but the impact launched her dozens of paces back. With a smile, Cennis turned his full attention on the crusader. Anajinn. She still fought hard, staring at both paladins with cold determination, but the power of her blows was weakening. As it should. As all enemies of the Hand of Zakarum inevitably did when confronted by righteousness. She swung her flail once, twice, three times, missing by a couple paces.

"Time to die," he said.

"As you say," she replied. And suddenly there were two crusaders… three… four…

charging…

With a yell, Cennis lashed out wildly as two misty, translucent figures converged on him, each swinging a flail that whistled through the air. His attacks found both, and they disappeared like smoke in a breeze.

The other paladin wasn't so quick. Two more Anajinns swung their flails, and pieces of the man went in different directions. The mist vanished, and there was just one Anajinn again. She leaned on her shield, exhausted but flashing Cennis a small, savage grin.

"Tell me, paladin," she said. "Did your elders have to drag you into the clutches of evil, or did you go willingly?"

Cennis stared at her with wild eyes. The apprentice was returning to the fight, slowly, in pain, but surely. For a few moments, he simply stood. Then he turned and fled, limping, bleeding.

He heard Anajinn groan. "Don't make me chase you," she called. He bared his teeth, fury and fear battling within his mind. *Got to get away. Got to kill her. Got to… got to…*

Down the street, a shape moved into an alley. Cennis followed it.

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Anajinn waited for the apprentice to catch up. "That could have gone worse," the crusader remarked with a pained smile.

The apprentice was out of breath. "The paladin… innkeeper's wife…"

Anajinn's smile disappeared. "Where?" The apprentice pointed toward an alley up ahead.

Cennis vanished into it.

Somehow, they found the strength to run after him.

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"Reiter," Bea said, her hands clasped on his cheeks. "What did they do to you?"

His white eyes rolled around in his head. "I can't see," he said. His voice was strained. He gripped her wrists as though terrified she would let him go. "He took… I can't see. Are you hurt? Lilsa? Is she here?"

"I'm here," Lilsa said. The child's eyes were wide and shiny with tears.

Reiter crouched down, not quite looking in the right direction, reaching blindly. "Lilsa?" Finally his hands found her, and he pulled her close. He rocked back and forth, eyes turned upward as though trying to meet Bea's gaze. "I'm sorry," he croaked. "I'm so sorry."

"Doesn't matter now," Bea said as firmly as she could. "I think…" She listened for a moment. The sounds of battle had ceased. "I think the fight is over."

"Who won?" Reiter whispered.

Bea opened her mouth to say, *I don't know,* but another voice cut her off. "The Hand of Zakarum always wins, filth."

Lilsa screamed.

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The scream was unmistakable. A child. "Go around the side," Anajinn said softly.

The apprentice shook her head. "I'm not leaving you."

"And I'm not asking. Go around the side." The crusader's voice was no longer soft. The apprentice reluctantly nodded and limped around the building, a cooper's shop, by the looks of it.

Anajinn hoped the innkeeper and his family had already fled the area. But she never relied on hope. "Paladin!" Anajinn called out. "Are you truly planning to bring innocents into our fight?"

A shadow appeared at the edge of the alley. "In this town, there are no innocents," a furious voice said. "Not when it shelters the likes of you."

Anajinn set her jaw and raised her shield. She suspected appealing to his mercy would be less than useless. Stoking his pride, however…

"Do you hide in the darkness, then?" She needed to draw him out, needed to give her apprentice a chance to flank him. "Is that how the *servants of the faith* fight?"

With a feral snarl, he stepped out. Anajinn's heart sank. His left arm was around Bea's throat. His right fist hovered an inch away from her ear. Worse, Lilsa was in Bea's arms. The girl clutched her mother's abdomen, staring at the man holding them both hostage.

Sparks flew from the paladin's right fist. Bea didn't flinch, even when the sparks found her flesh. *Good,* Anajinn thought. *Show him nothing. Show your daughter nothing.*

"How proud would the elders be to see you now?" Anajinn asked. "How proud would the congregation in the Travincal temples be to see a champion of their faith cowering behind a pregnant woman and a child?"

Cennis laughed, a desperate sound. "There is no congregation. Not anymore. Travincal… I don't believe I have any elders, either. But I will do the task they assigned me."

"And what task is that?"

"Heretics. There's always so many heretics. I know what you are." His half-mad laughter echoed through the street. "Few in my order do. But I know. You think we are corrupt. Damned. But you are the ones who left, crusader. You and your kind, you ran. You faced nothing. You scuttled away into the swamplands to hide. We stayed behind to deal with the problem."

"Is that what your elders told you? They lied."

It was as though he didn't hear her. His expression twisted from anger into horror in mere heartbeats. He was staring a thousand miles and twenty years away. "Why did you run? Why did you leave me?" Tears fell from his eyes. His voice seemed to turn childlike. "The things they did to me… the things they made me do… Why didn't you help? Did you know? Did you know what was waiting for me? They made me hate. They filled me with hate." His fist trembled but didn't move away from Bea's head.

"We knew enough," Anajinn said softly. "Evil had already claimed the foundation of Zakarum. We couldn't save it. Not on our own. So we looked for something that could."

"Did you find it?" That child's voice again. Hopeful.

"Not yet," Anajinn said.

"Then it was for nothing. All for nothing." Cennis seemed close to weeping for a moment. Then, the child vanished, and the paladin returned. His gaze hardened. "Put your weapon down, crusader. Put your shield down. Cast your armor aside. Or I will kill them." His arm tightened around Bea's throat. Her eyes met Anajinn's, silently pleading, not for her life but for Lilsa's.

Reiter crawled out of the alley, head swiveling, staring at nothing. "No," he cried. "My family. Mercy. Please. *Mercy!*"

"Do it, crusader!"

Anajinn could see her apprentice peeking around the corner of the cooper's building, behind Cennis. She could also see the apprentice shake her head slowly. Anajinn exhaled. Her apprentice could do nothing, not with the paladin in full armor and clutching hostages. Any attack strong enough to eliminate him would eliminate them all.

A sense of peace fell upon her. She let the shaft of her flail slip from her fingers. It tumbled to the ground.

"I want you to know something, Cennis." She firmly stuck her shield into the sand. It stood upright on its own. "I want you to have hope." Her gauntlets hit the sand next. Then her chestplate. The simple woven shirt she wore underneath was still stained with blood and sweat. "I did not find what I was looking for. Neither did my master, or her master before her." Her shoulder plates fell. Then her leg guards. "But despite that, I have no regrets. Someone will find what we need. The faith will be cleansed. And no matter what you do to me"—her boots she kicked off carelessly—"I have not yet reached the end of my journey. My crusade will continue."

Anajinn saw a child's hope flash across Cennis's face. The moment passed quickly. Only cold murder remained. The paladin extended his right arm, and a glowing hammer leaped toward her.

She kept her eyes open and smiled to the last.

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Bea shut her eyes tight. A moment later, the sound died away. The man's arm slipped from her throat.

"Don't you dare move, woman," the paladin growled into her ear. She nodded, but he had already stepped away toward Anajinn.

Toward what remained of her, anyway. Bea held Lilsa close, keeping her from turning her head and seeing. Tears leapt to her eyes.

"Looks like the end of your journey to me," the paladin sneered. He kicked the crusader's chestplate. "Looks like your search is over."

"It's not."

Bea and the paladin turned together toward the voice. The apprentice stood with her sword in hand. With a roar, the paladin flung a hammer at her.

There was a tremendous crash of sound and fury, and a great, billowing cloud of fire flared where the girl was standing an instant ago. Of the crusader's apprentice, there was no sign.

For the briefest moment.

Light crashed down from above. The apprentice crashed down with it. The paladin saw it coming. And a childlike look of relief passed over his face.

And then it was over.

The apprentice knelt down next to her master and whispered something Bea couldn't hear.

But there was no mistaking the glints of light falling to the sand. Tears.

The teenager stood up. Picked up Anajinn's shield.

"Bea?" Reiter croaked. "Bea? Are you hurt?"

Bea ran over to him. "I'm fine. Lilsa's fine."

"Anajinn?" His voice trembled. "Is she—?"

"I'm here," the apprentice said. Bea looked at her with confusion.

Reiter cocked his head. "A-Anajinn? Is that you?"

"Yes," the apprentice said. She strapped on the last of the crusader's armor and stepped over to the blinded man. Carefully, she laid a hand on his forehead and opened Anajinn's book of laws. She softly began to recite a different passage. Reiter blinked repeatedly. His head swiveled back and forth. His eyes were no longer pure white. His restored pupils darted around. The apprentice sighed. "That is all I can do. Are you well?"

Reiter looked directly at Bea. "I can… It's not… It's blurry," he said, squinting. He looked at the girl. "Thank you, Anajinn." There was still uncertainty in his voice. Bea realized he could see the shape of her armor and not much else. "You sound different."

"I suppose so," she said.

V

"That is what the oath entails," Anajinn said. "It's about the dedication to the search. About the commitment to saving the faith, even if you are not the one who will save it."

Reiter listened in closely, hunched over, back sore. The crusader's words were muffled but audible from the library, even with the door closed. When the inn had been rebuilt nearly twenty years ago, he'd had to settle for thinner walls. He'd sold half the land to pay for it. Sacrifices were made. Still, the inn would never be restored to its former glory.

"I think I understand," Lilsa said. She had been overjoyed to meet Anajinn again for the first time since she was a little girl. For days, she had sat and talked with the crusader for hours on end. "It's not hope; it's purpose. That's why you pass down the original crusader's name. You're trying to live up to their sacrifice."

"That's one of the reasons," Anajinn said.

Reiter felt a pain in his stomach. He quietly sat down on the stairs, joints creaking. He didn't want them to know he was eavesdropping on them. His hands, long since gnarled with age, reflexively opened and closed. His heart pounded and sweat dripped from his brow.

"Is this something you're truly ready to commit to, Lilsa? My master once told me, if you choose this life, you can embrace it; you can curse it; but you must never regret it. Our kind rarely lives long, and the years we're lucky enough to experience are filled with hardships."

"Yes," Lilsa said firmly. Reiter squeezed his eyes shut, suppressing a groan. "I want to go with you on your search, to…" She paused. "Where would we go first?"

"Truth be told, I've changed my plans in recent days," Anajinn said. "I've heard that a star has fallen over New Tristram. Nightmares walk the land. I suspect I won't be the first crusader to arrive, but perhaps we'll manage to make ourselves useful."

Lilsa clapped her hands with excitement. The door to the library burst open, and Reiter quickly stood up and pretended to shuffle down the stairs, as though he were simply heading back to the common room. He tried to keep his dread from his expression. A thousand words fluttered through his thoughts, forming admonitions, warnings, refusals, ultimatums. Anything that would make Lilsa change her mind, make her see reason.

None of which, he knew, he would ever have the courage to say.

"Father," Lilsa said. "I have something important to tell you."

"I suppose you do," he said.

MIDDLEWICK

ERIC SABOL

The soldier raised his torch and leaned forward, leathers creaking. His eyes were narrow in their examination. The light of his flame sent shadows waltzing through the orchard, twisting and morphing through the brush like dark appendages slithering in retreat of the starlight. Above him, the wind—stiff and unseasonably chilly for early autumn—wrestled through the canopy of leaves and branches, ushering all seven of the corpses into a lazy sway from their nooses.

He lingered for several minutes at the bloodied feet of the old man, hanging heavily from a short oak tree. The glow of the torch's flame darkened the contours of the carcass's frail frame and accentuated its skeletal fragility; between tears in the clothing, the light found liver spots, open sores, jagged veins, and something odd behind the ribbons of fabric fluttering against the cadaver's sunken chest. The soldier craned his neck. Cautiously he lifted a gauntleted hand, squinting through the firelight as he pinched the fabric between two fingers. He brought the torch closer and tilted his head as he gently tugged downward on the loose flap of cloth, following the series of intricate red creases that split the skin of the old man's breast and trailed down the sternum, over the belly, and—

"Harringer," a man barked from the tree line. "Stop undressing the corpses."

The soldier spun, torch extended, splashing light onto the dark path between trees. The newcomer grinned, hands on his hips, his black armor nearly camouflaging him against the shadowy brush. He sashayed forward from behind that smile—two rows of perfect white teeth set against an austere landscape of deep wrinkles and heavy stubble—and took his place beside the young soldier.

Harringer turned back toward the carcass swinging from its rope. "Stretvanger's lost his mind," he said, stretching again to scrutinize the scratches on the old man's torso. "Have you seen what he's done to this fellow?"

The man in dark armor shook his head. "I haven't. And neither should you. Hands off, remember? We're not supposed to touch these things."

"Why not, you figure?"

"Not my area." He chewed his lower lip, looking up thoughtfully at the old body. "Stretvanger wants them to bleed out. We're not to touch them till the big man gives the order, you understand?"

Harringer gave an absent nod, eyes passing over the corpse's moist, milky flesh. "He's carved symbols into this poor man's chest and stomach." He moved the torch to the opposite hand and continued his probing.

"He's drip-drying the blood out of them. Stretvanger was adamant. Wants them dry as raisins."

"That's odd, don't you think? To cut in patterns?"

The newcomer shrugged. "No odder than storming Middlewick and ordering the execution of four farmers, two barmaids, and a midwife without discernible reason or cause."

Harringer followed the trail of cuts down the cadaver's stomach and started yanking at his waistband. "This one wasn't a farmer. He was the florist, I think." He unfastened the drawstring belt with one hand, lowered the shredded pants, and traced the gashes down both gaunt thighs. The noose groaned against the bough.

"For all that's righteous, Harringer, there's a whorehouse in Southfield. Finish your patrol and I'll treat you to a go-around, but for whatever goodness is left in your heart, button the poor farmer's trousers."

"*Florist*," Harringer corrected, hoisting the tattered britches and retying the belt. "You think Stretvanger carved the other bodies too?"

The man hawked a wad of spit into the trees. "Couldn't tell you. That man is a mountain of secrets. It's been four days; we've killed seven people, and he hasn't uttered a word of explanation."

Harringer paused briefly, eyebrows drawn in deep thought. He turned suddenly and sped off farther into the orchard.

"Harrin—" The man in the dark armor shook his head and sighed, then pursued the soldier into the heart of the trees. "Damn it, Harringer, hands off, remember?"

When their footsteps faded and the light from Harringer's torch was only a glimmer through the brush, two children stumbled from the darkness. Dalya and Istanten lingered in the path, listening to the soldiers' voices, measuring their distance. And then, pruning shears tucked into her waistband, Dalya scurried toward the bony old carcass swinging from the oak.

"Keep a lookout," she told Istanten. "I'll get him down." The boy pressed two fingers to his throat and offered a croaky grunt of acknowledgment.

Dalya drew the shears and secured them between her teeth. Ducking under the corpse, she moved to the tree and probed the trunk for handholds. Istanten's eyes bounced between Harringer's faraway flame and Dalya's nimble scurry to the top of the

oak tree, watching as she navigated the branches and shimmied along the bough toward the rope's knotted end.

Down the path, the orchard echoed with the newcomer's husky cackle.

With one arm wrapped around the branch, Dalya grabbed the shears from her mouth and stretched toward the length of rope. She sawed patiently, jerking the blades back and forth, rope swaying and bough creaking under stress of weight and movement. The first strands of fiber popped and frayed under the shears; she persisted, gaining speed as the rope unraveled and the corpse below sagged lopsidedly.

Istanten pressed two fingers to the apple of his throat and emitted a low growl. Dalya froze. A tense gurgle spewed from his lips, and the boy scampered from the road and ducked into the shadows. She heard Harringer's voice, a ways down the path but growing nearer.

"Istanten!" she whispered, holding tight to the branch. The boy offered no answer from the darkness. She growled, gritted her teeth, and continued sawing at the rope. The light of the torch caught the corner of her eye as spears of it pierced the underbrush and splashed out onto the path. She hacked more fiercely, the muscles of her arm igniting, her breath trapped in her throat. The rope tattered under the blade, its grip on the corpse slackening. Harringer's footsteps were close now; she heard the leaves and rocks crunching under his boots, the gentle clink of his buckles as he walked. She fought angrily with the rope, paring strand after strand with the cold steel of the shears, until Harringer's voice rang through the quiet darkness.

"You there," he called, waving his torch.

Dalya turned her head cautiously, squinting through the firelight at the soldier's silhouette. Her heart thrashed against her ribcage. She made to respond but the words never came, and she held silently to the branch for several seconds. Harringer shuffled forward, his left hand resting on his sword hilt. Dalya swallowed hard and steadied her nerves with a deep breath.

The trees were too dense on this side of the path. However, if she dropped from the branch, found her feet, and sprinted for the brush across the way, she and Istanten might disappear before the soldier even considered pursuit. But if she landed wrong—if she lost her balance or twisted an ankle…

She ran through options in her head as Harringer's silhouette approached. Frozen by indecision, she held tight to the branch and watched the soldier grow closer and closer until he neared the base of her tree. Her fist squeezed the shears and her arm strangled the branch. She tensed and prepared to make her leap, but Harringer kept walking. Dalya felt the heat of his torch as he passed nearby, and spotted the small man forty yards down the path as Harringer's light found him in the gloom of the orchard.

"Sir!" the soldier hollered. "You can't be here."

The diminutive man had no answer. He just shook his head absently, hands kneaded in front of him, and stared up at the young woman dangling from her noose. Harringer repeated himself, slightly increasing his pace. The man pointed at the body and smiled sadly. "My wife," he said. Harringer advanced warily and patted the man's shoulder. Gently he ushered him from the orchard and into the darkness.

Dalya expelled a shaky breath. She pried her fingernails from the bough and held to her perch, wind tousling her hair and clothes. The hanging corpse rotated with the

breeze, and the rope gave a dry groan. Istanten wobbled from the brush, waved to Dalya, then pointed at the corpse.

"What is it?" she whispered.

The rope twisted, whined, and gave a final pop, and the body thudded to the earth. The branch shook viciously and tossed Dalya, and she landed hard atop the carcass. Istanten helped her to her feet and allowed her a moment to find her breath before he seized the body by the armpits and dragged it toward the brush.

Dalya tucked the shears into her waistband, swiped the dirt from her clothes, and grabbed the old man's feet. "Careful with his head," she said, and together the children carried the corpse into the trees and toward Middlewick. Neither made a sound as they trundled through the fields; the rush of the river and the squawking of crows were their only company in the middle of the night.

II

Dalya stripped the rags from her grandfather's emaciated body. She ripped a tatter from his shirt, soaked it, and gently scrubbed the dirt from the old man's chest and face. She cleaned the edges of the lacerations that ran down his form—a bizarre series of symbols carved cruelly into his flesh—and then dragged the cold corpse into the front bedroom. The first splashes of sunlight colored the early morning sky as she pulled him into bed and drew the sheets up to his stubbly chin. She planted a quick kiss on his forehead and trudged out to the shack behind the cottage.

There she traded shears for shovel and set off for the woods outside of town—the cluster of trees opposite the orchard. As she strolled through acres of twilit fields, her mind rendered numb from last night's raid, she found herself curiously engaged by her

grandfather's spade. The old man had owned it for decades, but the tool had acted more like ornament than instrument; elaborate hieroglyphs decorated the dark wood of the shaft, spiraling downward until they dead-ended at the base of the ivory head. The head itself was narrow and acutely pointed, finely etched with patterns of flowers and vines. It was a striking tool, and in her twelve years, Dalya had never seen her grandfather use it.

She found the clearing just as the sun broke over the mountains. After double-checking her measurements—six feet long, four wide—she buried the ivory spade in the dirt and wrenched free the first shovelful of earth from between her feet. She spent the morning ripping into the forest floor, careful not to break any roots or damage the surrounding flora, chipping away at the soil, sinking deeper and deeper into her grandfather's grave.

At noon, she stopped to rest. She scampered from the hole, strands of hair plastered to her forehead, her face and clothes clotted with dirt. Several minutes passed. She basked in the cool woodland breeze, recouping her energy and meditating to the birdsong. The feeling was short-lived.

The pitter-patter of hurried footfalls and the crackling of the underbrush sent her stomach into knots. She lurched to her feet, spade hefted in defense. Pivoting in the churned soil, she scanned the trees for the source of the sound, eyes flickering between shifting shadows and swaying branches.

Istanten tumbled from the bushes. Dalya flinched and teetered backward, catching her balance near the edge of the hole.

The boy hunkered over to find his breath, sucking air in choppy, guttural wheezes.

Dalya stabbed the shovel into the earth and laid a hand on his shoulder. "What is it?"

He glanced up at her, chest heaving, and pointed west toward town. With his other hand, he pressed two fingers against his throat and emitted a low grumble.

She knelt before him, locating his eyes behind the swath of sweat-slicked hair. "Did they find my grandpa?" The boy did not respond. He only huffed and gasped, his shaking finger still leveled toward Middlewick.

Dalya sprang up and leapt into the thicket, branches and vines tugging at her hair and clothes. She stumbled over rocks and roots but maintained a steady balance while racing toward the village, oblivious to her exhaustion and the fire in her lungs, and erupted from the tree line in a flurry of jerky breaths and churning limbs. She vaulted fences and cleared fields, kicking up earth in her wake. Head down, arms pumping, heart thundering, she moved through the streets, evading people, carts, wagons, and packbeasts until she rounded the corner toward her grandfather's cottage.

The road was empty. The cottage was alone and quiet at the head of the street. A flood of relief washed over her like rain. Dalya's legs liquefied beneath her, and the girl collapsed on the cobbles. There she sat—a mess of hair and tears and heavy breathing— measuring the cottage in wondrous and exhausted respite.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the road, so wide and so large she thought the sun might've disappeared behind the clouds. Dalya turned, a ball of anxious pain growing in her belly.

Stretvanger loomed over her, an oak of a man swaddled in royal robes. His face was hidden beneath the dark folds of his hood, but his chiseled chin jutted out like a slab

of stone from the edge of a cliff. The baggy garments betrayed the immensity of his form save the belt fastened round his belly; thick and smooth, the glossy leather strap, when stretched to its maximum length, was taller than she was, Dalya figured. Several soldiers—Harringer and his black-armored compatriot among them—were fanned out behind the gargantuan bishop, stiff and stoic in their posture.

He reached down, his body creaking and popping, and wrapped a gentle hand around Dalya's arm. With a tender tug, he lifted her to her feet. "Little girl," he said, a brooding impatience dripping in his voice. "Is your grandfather home?"

Dalya raked a strand of hair from her eyes. The burn of Stretvanger's gaze wilted her confidence, and all she could muster was a shake of her head. When the weak rebuttal failed to break his stare, Dalya pointed with trembling fingers toward the western wood. "He's in the orchard," she squeaked. "Where you left him."

"A clever answer, child, but a wrong one. Your grandfather wandered off last night." His eyes flicked toward the cottage door. "But death makes for a vicious handicap. I suspect he didn't get far." He pinched Dalya's soil-stained sleeve between two fingers and ogled the veins of cakey dirt that streaked across her tunic and trousers. His lips narrowed into a tight grin. "Have you seen him?"

"No, I think—"

Stretvanger nodded toward the cottage. "Might we have a look around, then?"

Dalya stepped warily toward the house, out of the bishop's enormous shadow. "No."

"Such discourtesy!" he jested, a syrupy chuckle rumbling out from the darkness of his hood. He turned and woofed an order at the throng of soldiers locked in formation.

They percolated toward the cottage; Stretvanger followed, stepping nonchalantly around the small girl in his path.

A flush of angry, panicked heat rose in Dalya's throat. "This…" she started, "this isn't right! What you're doing to these people—what you're doing to *us*—isn't right!"

Stretvanger called a halt. He half-turned, eyeing Dalya from over his shoulder. "Sheep need not be privy to the shepherd's motives. Just rest easy. We're cleansing this country."

The trepidation in her heart boiled over, steaming into ire and lacing her words with bitter rancor. "You're wrong."

The giant shrugged. He mumbled, "Children have no place in politics," and gave a signal to his soldiers. The air hummed with the ring of steel; soldiers crowded the cottage, swords raised and spines rigid as the front door was kicked from its hinges. "Search the wardrobes. Raid the attic. Check the outhouse. The body is *here*, and I want it back."

The militia charged through the doorway.

"Blood!" he hollered at their backs. "The bastard's still bleeding. Look for dark, sour blood."

From the street, Dalya heard the shattering of pottery and the sharp splintering of wood. Arms crossed, sun on his back, Stretvanger watched his men scour the cottage from his spot on the lawn as he rocked unsteadily on his heels.

Droplets of sweat dripped into Dalya's eyes. Numb with fury, she did not blink them away. The salt stung and muddied her vision, but she never lost focus on the lumbering man in the heavy robes overseeing the ravaging of her grandfather's house.

Her house. She listened as they ransacked her vault of memories, the font of her solace— the only place ever worthy of being called her home. And she trembled with rage.

She pried a pointed cobble from the road. Teeth gritted and brow narrowed, she measured Stretvanger's back and, knuckles white around the rock, stalked toward him, eyes locked to the space just inches below his belt—the base of the giant's spine. She moved rapidly, betraying stealth as her footsteps smacked the street, but Stretvanger never turned. When she was within arm's length, Dalya hefted the rock, tightened her grip, and zeroed in on her target.

But before she struck, Harringer lurched through the doorway. His sword was tucked into his scabbard and his fingers were riddled with cuts and splinters. "We found blood on the old man's sheets," he said.

The bishop's lips parted slightly. "Blood?" The word rumbled from the hood like a drumroll. "Yes?"

Harringer did not match gazes with Stretvanger, opting instead to study the ground between the giant's feet. "But there's no body. We looked absolutely everywhere." Dalya's brow furrowed. She dropped the stone and staggered backward.

Stretvanger was silent for several seconds before pivoting on his heel and peering at the child. He tore into her with his cold stare for a few tense moments, his emotions concealed behind the shadows of his hood, before swallowing hard and offering a subtle nod.

"Right," the bishop mumbled, pushing past the girl and hurrying into town.

III

Eventually the last of the soldiers filed out, leaving Dalya mired in a mess of clothes and upturned chests at the foot of her grandfather's empty bed. The sheets, stained dark with dirt, wrapped her like a sordid cocoon. She cried, knees pulled tight against her, and surveyed the wreckage through a mist of tears. She spent several minutes curled there, more than once turning to check the cot for the old man's frail form. The narrow imprint of his body was still embossed in the bed, along with the dried blood and grime, but the corpse was gone, vanished like smoke in a windstorm.

A stray cat screeched off in the distance.

Dalya wiped away her tears with the filthy sheet and staggered to her feet. Shuffling through the clutter, she moved to the window and drew the curtains. Warm spears of sunlight spilled through the pane, catching faint spirals of dust sailing through the bedroom. Numbly she tottered to the cherry chests in the far corner and began straightening the ruffled clothes within. Her mind was still as she worked, the thoughts in her head knotted in a quiet, deadened stasis. She collected her grandfather's things—old notes, a few tarnished rings she had never seen—and filed them precisely into the chests along the walls.

In the opposite corner of the room, beneath a pair of crumpled trousers, Dalya recovered the old man's worn diary. The cover, dark and wrinkled and coarse with age, hung intact by a few weakening strands; the pages lolled out from the spine like a hundred brittle, yellowed tongues, and Dalya caught glimpse, for the first time, of the crude scrawling under the book's craggy jacket. The lettering seemed familiar, like the cuts on the old man's body, but the language was lost to her—random words and symbols sloppily transcribed on each page, overflowing into the margins, through most of the

diary. She found some sketches near the back, doodles of flowers or simple landscapes, but nothing she immediately recognized.

The stray cat shrieked again, from somewhere just beyond the door. The sound of frantic, muffled scratches caught Dalya's ear. She laid the book on the floor beside the chests, cautiously crossed the room, and poked her head into the hallway.

"Hello?" she called.

For a moment, the cottage fell silent. Then the furious mewing started again, from the kitchen at the edge of the hall. She moved warily toward the sound, one careful footstep after the other, until she rounded the corner and stepped onto the cold stone tile of the vacant kitchen. Jagged fragments of decorative plates littered the floor, and the supper table was upturned and shoved against the far wall. The anxious screeching was louder now. Deeper. Human.

Dalya gasped and ran to the larder. Rolling clear the toppled barrels of rice and potatoes, she curled her fingers around the edge of the floorboards and pulled up a square section of paneling. Beneath the floor, in the hole under the larder, sat Istanten; the boy stared up at her with wide, wet eyes, the corpse of her grandfather draped over him.

She grinned. "Are you stuck?" Istanten snarled. He reached up from the bottom of the pit. Dalya grabbed hold of his hand, and together they pried him out from under the weight of the body. He climbed free and, with his sleeve, wiped the remnants of tears from his cheeks. Dalya hovered over the hole for a moment, studying her grandfather's crumpled cadaver.

"Is… is he hurt?" she asked. The boy rolled his eyes and shrugged, raking the hair from his face. Her grandfather was slumped awkwardly, neck crooked and arms twisted in the cramped crater. "I hate to leave him like that, but I think he's safer here than anywhere else."

Istanten grunted his agreement. Dalya slid the paneling back into place and squeezed past Istanten and into the kitchen. "Will you stay and keep watch?"

His eyes darkened and he furiously shook his head.

Dalya nodded. "Fine. But we need to finish the grave. Tonight." She stepped into the hallway and headed for the door.

Istanten grumbled softly and followed her, his footsteps resonant in the empty house.

IV

Dalya tore another shovelful of dirt from the grave, tossing it aside with a shaky grip. Her arms ached. Splintering pain needled through her shins and ankles. Her eyes were swollen and heavy, her body weak and frail under an iron cloak of exhaustion. The late afternoon sun had taken reprieve behind dark clouds, and the woods grew colder around her.

Istanten patrolled the perimeter, teeth chattering, eyelids fluttering against the icy autumn breeze. For hours he eyed the brush for any sound or movement, stalking the tree line with his arms tucked cozily into his tunic.

The children shared no words until nightfall, when Istanten's shoe caught hold of a root. The boy spilled forward, face scraping the dead leaves and pebbles of the forest floor. Untangling his arms from the inside of his shirt, Istanten scrambled to his feet.

Smudges of dirt covered the bags under his eyes, but the moonlight showed agonizing fatigue in the deadness of his pupils, the downward slant of his posture. From the depths of her grandfather's grave, Dalya smiled and leveled a trembling hand toward her companion. Istanten staggered toward her, seized her by the wrist, and hauled her from the hole.

Dalya stabbed the pointed shovel into the unturned earth at the edge of the grave. She embraced Istanten and kissed the boy's dirty cheek. "I owe you everything for helping me," she said, sagging wearily against him. "So go home. Get some sleep."

Istanten pulled away, jabbed a thumb against his throat, and growled sourly. "It's fine," she reassured him. "We're done here. It's deep enough." She moved to the tree line and sat down, drawing her knees close in defense against the cold.

The boy measured her for several seconds, uttering a low grumble that was almost lost under the wind.

"I'm going to sit for a few minutes," she said, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. "You go on. I'll see you tomorrow."

Istanten shrugged and turned, plodding off into the darkness behind heavy, tired footsteps.

For a long while it was just Dalya, alone with the breeze and the soft rustle of the foliage. She was too uncomfortable to doze, but nevertheless, she rested her eyes and set her head back against the craggy bark of an oak tree, relaxing her limbs and unconsciously rubbing the gooseflesh from her arms. She counted the passing seconds to help steady her mind, delving into the thousands, before the voice interrupted her thoughts.

"It's too damn cold to sleep out here."

Dalya's eyes fired open. She popped to her feet and spun, vision flickering toward every tree, every branch, every shifting shadow. She saw the smile first, immaculately uniform teeth set against the blackness of the woods. As he approached her, he became an outline, then a silhouette, and finally—a mere arm's length away—a thick figure, armored in metal as dark as the sky.

Harringer's friend from the orchard.

"What are you doing here?" she spat, knees trembling beneath her weight.

The soldier stepped past her, armor clinking softly as he moved. He stood silently at the edge of the grave, hands on his hips, and scanned the clearing. After a moment, he took a seat and pushed a windy sigh from his lungs. "Who was he? The old fellow."

Dalya hesitated, frozen, staring wide-eyed at the man's back.

He looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "The body Stretvanger seeks. Who was he?"

Their gazes intertwined, and they shared a handful of tense heartbeats before Dalya said, "He was my grandpa."

"He was more than *that*, surely, for all the time we've wasted trying to find him." A stiff gust of wind blustered through the clearing. The canopy of leaves shifted above them. "He was a farmer, I hear."

"A florist," Dalya corrected. "He was the town florist."

The soldier held her in his gaze, studying her in the darkness. "And what else?"

"A traveler."

"Yeah?"

Dalya nodded. "And a carpenter," she said, the onset of tears straining her voice. "He was a storyteller, and a laugher, and an animal lover, and an early riser, and—"

The words caught. Dalya took a deep, shaky breath. "And he was the only parent I've ever known. He was a good man, and he didn't deserve this."

The soldier in dark armor turned away from her again, his legs dangling over the side of the grave. "A good man," he muttered. He spoke toward the hole in the ground, almost to himself. "You'll find, child, as you age, that our realm is not shaded in black and white. It's an ugly, confusing, pallid gray. From where you're standing, it's a place where kind florists are hanged without reason, and criminals wear royal frocks and issue orders to lesser men."

He stood and faced her, his heels at the edge of the grave. "But reality has no time for good and evil," he continued. "It's not invested in your perspective or mine. Reality is concerned only with truth, and your grandfather—the traveling, laughing storyteller—died with a heart full of secrets. And Stretvanger has come to make sure they *stay* secret."

"By hanging him in the orchard and cutting symbols into his body?"

"You'll learn not to question the tall man in the robes. Those symbols are a net, a safety, keeping your grandfather's dark mysteries in the shadows. Where they belong."

Dalya swallowed back the lump in her throat. "How did you find me here?"

"I followed you. After you left the cottage. Hoped you'd lead me to the body." "I'm sorry to disappoint you," she said.

The man flashed his brilliant smile. "I'm sorry too," he said. "Because you know the location of your grandfather's corpse, and that means I have to drag you back to

Stretvanger. And take my word, *that's* not good for anyone involved." He reached for her. "Now come. We're out of time."

Dalya's chest tensed. Her exhaustion drowned in an ocean of frightened ferocity, and in one fluid arc, she drew the ornate shovel from the dirt and swung. The pointed edge scraped across the man's face, rending his flesh and tearing skin from bone. The sound of ivory on skull reverberated through the clearing in a sharp shockwave; the soldier spun sideways and collapsed into the empty grave.

V

Middlewick shimmered like a lantern under the black sky, alight with fire and the screams of the dying. Dozens of militiamen paraded through streets and fields and farmland with torches raised and swords drawn. Desperate pleas and crackling flames permeated the icy night air as Stretvanger's soldiers shattered windows, smashed doorways, and set houses ablaze. Townspeople poured into the streets like rodents, clutching their children and possessions, stumbling confusedly about in charred nightwear.

Stretvanger's voice boomed through the chaos like the call of a war horn drowning the clatter of battle. "They have scars! Look for the scars!" the bishop bellowed as people flooded past him through the road. "Look for the runes and purge their bodies with flames! If they bleed, then they're not dead!"

Dalya sneaked low through the fields, the stench of smoke stinging her eyes. On her hands and knees, she circumvented the town, crawling its perimeter until she found her grandfather's cottage beyond the tall grass. Conjuring the last ounces of energy from her muscles, she dashed toward the house and bolted through the fractured doorway. She

sprang down the hall, collapsed as she entered the kitchen, and sprawled awkwardly amid the cracked dishes. Her legs were cold beneath her, and she did not have the balance to stand; instead she inched her way into the larder, fully prepared to slither from Middlewick, grandfather in tow, if she could not find her feet.

Rolling aside the toppled food barrels, she ripped the loose paneling from the floor and peered down into the hole. The reek of decay burned her nostrils and choked her like a tangle of fishhooks. A violent sob rose in her chest, and Dalya began to shiver.

The hole was empty. Cautious footsteps echoed through the house.

"Istanten?" she called, but there was no answer.

She sifted through the debris on the larder floor, brushing aside shards of plates and splintered spears of tile and wood. Dalya scrabbled through the mess, looking for a knife or fork or a spike of broken dish big enough to slash her way through to the doorway, but she froze mid-search when she spotted the pruning shears in the hallway beyond the kitchen.

Bloodstained, handle to blade.

Torchlight sprayed over the walls, and Harringer—his frame bowing beneath heavy armor—stepped into her vision and darkened the larder doorway. He took a moment to study her in the light, then leaned back into the kitchen and hollered, "I found her! She's in here."

There was muffled chatter from somewhere outside. Harringer offered his hand, but Dalya shuffled backward, closer to the empty hole. "What's happening?" she asked, the words husky and cracked as they slogged past her lips.

"Nothing like I've ever seen," he said. His eyes were round and slick with worry. "The other six bodies have vanished from the orchard."

"Vanished?"

"Gone. Disappeared."

"And my grandpa?"

Someone screamed outdoors. Harringer's fingers brushed the hilt of his blade. His eyes flicked back to Dalya, and he offered his hand again. "We have to go."

She gawked up at him for several seconds, her breaths hard and uneven. "I don't think I can stand."

Harringer stepped in and scooped her up from the ground. Dalya wrapped her arms around his neck as he backed from the larder and out into the kitchen. The ruins of plates and silverware crunched under the young soldier's boots. Just as they turned into the hallway, Stretvanger planted a mammoth, gnarled hand on Harringer's chestplate.

"Put her down," the giant growled, his head cocked slightly under the roof of the cottage. Bloody smears colored the front of his robes, and a thin trail of crusty crimson dribbled from one ear.

Harringer hesitated. Stretvanger slapped him across the face, sending the soldier reeling back into the kitchen. Dalya spilled from his grip and crashed to the floor as the bishop's titanic form stalked toward her. He plunged a hand into his robes and drew a curved dagger from their folds. His fingers wrapped the hilt like five bony snakes, and he leaned close, spine and knees crackling beneath his frame.

His breath was hot ash upon her face. "Where," he whispered, "is your grandfather?"

She shook her head. "I… I don't—"

Stretvanger lashed out, slicing her cheek with cold steel. Dalya winced, tears beading at the corners of her eyes. "Show me!" he roared, seizing a handful of her clothing and hauling her upward. Harringer watched from the edge of the room, lips parted and colorless, as the bishop held the knife to Dalya's throat.

The girl opened her mouth to speak; she contorted her lips and rolled her tongue, but she found no words.

"I will water your grandfather's flowers with your blood," Stretvanger hissed. "I will level the countryside. I will burn your memory from existence if you don't answer me."

"I—" The knife bit her throat, and Dalya flinched. She met Stretvanger's unbreakable stone stare and saw no pretense in his eyes—no tricks and no insincerity. But there was no malice either. Dalya saw only terror, stark, urgent dread in the giant's wide pupils. "The woods. You'll find a clearing due east from the mill. He's in an open grave."

With his knife hand, Stretvanger pointed to Harringer. "Go," he barked, and the young man scrambled into the hall and through the front doorway, screaming orders to his comrades in the streets.

"Put me down, please?" Dalya murmured.

The bishop surveyed the kitchen, shaking his head, muttering, "No, no, no," through a subtle smile as his eyes probed the walls. He moved into the hallway and

carried her deeper into the cottage, opening various doors along the way. "You're far from exonerated, little girl. This is *your* mess we're cleaning."

He opened the door to the basement; a series of steep stairs delved down into the heavy darkness under the house, like a jagged tongue sprouting from a blackened maw. "I'll be back for you soon," Stretvanger promised. "To chat about the impiety of lies."

All at once, the darkness rushed forward. Dalya smashed against the staircase, ribs snapping, the world whirling as she tumbled into the basement. She smacked the stone floor with a thunderous thud. The doorway at the top of the steps was a narrow line of light, shrinking as Stretvanger closed and barred her exit.

From beyond the walls, she heard the dampened cries of her neighbors as Middlewick burned in the night. She heard the scurry of rats at the corners of the basement. She heard her own hoarse, labored breathing, her own shrill cries of pain as she clawed her way toward her grandfather's workbench, lost somewhere in the darkness.

Reaching up, she probed the bench for a candlestick. She laid it carefully in front of her and fished blindly through the tools for a firesteel. Steel in hand, she pressed the candle to the ground and dragged the striker across the floor. A rain of sparks littered the darkness, and with numb fingers, Dalya scraped it again and again until the candlewick ignited.

She squinted against the brilliance of the little flame. Tendrils of wax drizzled over her knuckles as her eyes adjusted to the light, and after a few seconds, she raised the candle and examined small illuminated pockets of the basement.

The candlelight skimmed every corner—the workbench, the bookshelves, the crates near the stairs. Dalya's exhausted mind nearly glossed over the old, desiccated man leaning against the opposite wall. His features were familiar—the slope of the shoulders, the hairline—but the man was tatty and worn, like someone wearing her grandfather's skin. His eyeballs were veiny white, reflecting the shine of the flame, and his mouth hung slack like a torn piece of clothing. All of his limbs drooped out of socket, and he flinched under her gaze.

Dalya's pulse thudded in her ears.

The creature snarled and staggered forward, pale runic scars running down his chest and thighs. Dalya scooted backward, her breaths choppy and pained. From the darkness stalked six others, all trudging toward her, inhuman sounds spilling from their warped faces.

"Grandpa?" she squeaked.

The candle clattered to the floor.

MIKULOV:
BROTHERS IN ARMS

SCOTT BRICK

Pain, be welcome in my home. You shall not live here long, yet while you stay with me, I receive you like an honored guest. You will know peace in this house, but only until the completion of my task, and at that point you must go. Yet until that moment arrives, I greet you like an old friend.

Sweat streaking down his face, the young novitiate recited the words in his head and struggled against the distraction of the pain lancing outward from the spot where his knees knelt on unyielding stone. The throbbing ache seemed to encompass his entire world, gathering intensity and radiating upward, but he struggled to shut it out of his awareness. Complaint achieved nothing; worse, it would prevent him from accomplishing his task. Kneeling for hours on the unforgiving surface had produced pain nearly so intolerable that it could keep him from recognizing his test, much less passing it. If the sensation stood in his way and he could not end it, he must therefore alter his perception of it. Only by embracing the pain could he surmount it.

Already I would have failed, the novitiate lamented, *if the masters could but read my thoughts.* The Ivgorod monks held a legendary control over their bodies, and in moments of stress their minds surpassed the physical realm to a higher state of being. They would tell him he must clear his mind, not so that he might achieve his goal but so that he might hear the gods when they spoke. They communicated to all who listened, using the wind, the rain, the rivers, wildlife, and in Ytar's case, even fire as their voice.

Yet now, the only thing that spoke in this vast, dark chamber was the pulse in Mikulov's ears, beating in sympathetic accord with the pain in his knees. Still, those paired

sensations and the beads of sweat on his brow were all signs that his body and mind were in less than perfect harmony. Mikulov forced calm on himself once more.

Pain, be welcome…

Grimacing, he feared he would never overcome it. How could one welcome that which was all but unendurable? He'd been a fool to think he could, just as he'd been a fool the moment he'd walked into this chamber when he saw that it had no way out…

In the Floating Sky Monastery, the home of the fabled monks of Ivgorod, located on the western main continent of Sanctuary, in the mountains on the edge of the Gorgorra forest, children grew up knowing loneliness without end. Whatever their reason for being there, they all knew well the intense hunger for family. The yearning bonded them, teaching them to cherish the ways they were alike. A single desire unified them—the expectation of one day becoming monks of the order. Those who showed insufficient aptitude for study endured a rude awakening when they were instructed to leave the monastery, but they were given one final chance: prevail over a physical challenge, thus earning the right to return by demonstrating a previously unseen talent for training, or be forsaken by the monastery forever.

Gachev, an older boy, had tormented Mikulov for years, until his mulishness and indifference to the monastery's discipline at last provoked the monks to test him. The weather had been brutally cold the day he was ordered to confront his challenge, and Gachev's provisions were few. The abject look of fear on the youth's face told Mikulov not to expect his return. And no one inside the order had heard from Gachev since. At first,

Gachev's being turned out had brought Mikulov joy, until he realized that he, too, questioned authority and that he, too, would likely face a similar challenge.

While the monastery's great portal had remained open and Gachev's form had dwindled in the barren distance, Mikulov had looked into the face of wizened old Master Vedenin. The monk's ancient robes, long, white beard, and smooth head made him nearly indistinguishable from his brethren. What set Vedenin apart, in an order known for its tranquility, was his harshness. His vehemence lurked in Mikulov's memory. *You are foolish*, Vedenin would rasp. Vedenin managed to keep his voice toneless but still inflect single words with vitriol, his timbre with contempt. *You have speed, agility, and a sharp mind, yet you are proud and impulsive and weak. You focus ever on slights and frustrations and make yourself deaf to the gods. Your actions will bring shame on you and on the monastery.* Mikulov heard the words again that day as Vedenin cast his disdainful gaze toward Gachev's departure. The monk clearly looked forward to delivering him someday to the same fate. By instinct or prescience, Mikulov understood that when his time came, Vedenin would dispatch him on his test.

That moment, Mikulov vowed not to fail. As young as he was, he would devote the rest of his days in the monastery to readying himself for the ordeal he knew he must eventually face.

The monks taught that every person was a living, breathing weapon, but relying on a single resource at all times was folly. A monk's true power, they taught, came from self-discipline and the spirit. The order therefore required its acolytes to master arms from three realms: weapons of the mind; weapons of physical combat; and the most potent,

weapons of spirit, calming their souls and tapping into the power the gods shared with their proven servants. When monks achieved this, they could wield more mundane weapons as an extension of their balanced spirit. Mikulov swore he would do likewise.

From the time they could walk, the children of the order were brought up in the company of physical weaponry. Mikulov particularly favored the punch dagger, the short blade wielded in one hand, gripped so its lethal tip protruded directly out from the fist, passing between his fingers. His rapport with the weapon came swiftly—even in an instant—though he at first balked at its imposition on him by Vedenin, of course. Originally Mikulov had wanted to use a bow.

"The bow is excellent for long-range use yet utterly ineffective up close," the old monk said with contempt.

Mikulov disagreed; the bow would keep his enemies at bay, denying them any opportunity to close the distance.

Vedenin countered that better choices for long-range combat rendered the bow a weakling's preference.

When Mikulov scoffed, the old man seized the chance to humiliate him before all the boys and girls present. Instructing him to take a bow and two arrows, Vedenin marched ten paces off and stood with his arms crossed, hands hidden within his robe's voluminous sleeves. "What would you use to attack me from this distance?" he asked.

Mikulov held up the bow.

"Do so."

Mikulov, in front of his fellow novitiates, heard the slight shift in Vedenin's voice from bandied words to a true test. He moved to nock the first arrow but kept his eyes on

Vedenin. A brief gesture within one sleeve, and the arrow's shaft snapped in Mikulov's hand.

Vedenin closed the gap between them to five paces. "And what would you use to attack me from this distance?"

Mikulov fumbled with his remaining arrow.

"Bows take time to prepare," Vedenin declared. "The spirit is instantaneous." His next gesture was so deft and subtle that Mikulov did not see it. Both the arrow and the bow exploded in Mikulov's hands. His ears burned with the other pupils' laughter.

The old man now stood an arm's length away. With smug condescension he asked, "And from this distance?"

Mikulov glared at him angrily. "My bare hands."

The movement of Vedenin's hand came more swiftly than his years should have allowed. The infinitesimally fine point and razor edges of a punch dagger passed so close to Mikulov's eyes he felt the blade slice the air.

"Try it," Vedenin murmured, softly, his words reaching Mikulov alone.

Humiliated though Mikulov had been by that lesson, he was acute enough to grasp its wisdom. His uncanny grace and balance soon made him formidable with this close-combat weapon, the sound of his exertions heard often on the practice field. In time, he found himself the dagger's master.

Mastery of the mind and of the spirit, however, eluded him.

True prowess came from more than incantations over arcane scrolls. No, the ancient order believed that the force of the gods was in all things, be they living or inert, and that

power must therefore flow over everything in creation. Thus, practitioners within the Floating Sky Monastery spent their lives learning to sense that force wherever it lay and manipulate it to whatever purposes served the Patriarchs, the voice of the gods in Ivgorod.

One day, when his punch dagger was a blur to those who watched it hammer the wooden post he used as a stand-in enemy, so unalloyed was Mikulov's concentration that he reflexively reached out with his mind, into the kinetic resonance of the gods' power. Though the action came about by chance, and though it harnessed only a fraction of the available force, his weapon struck the post with more than physical strength. A blue light crackled out of Mikulov's blade, and a shockwave knocked several onlookers off their feet. Ripples carried outward into the monastery's walls. Two stunned orphans ran, calling their wizened masters, though they needn't have bothered. Monks of the Floating Sky spent every day in rapt contemplation of their surroundings, waiting for signs from the gods. Such clear evidence of the divine could scarcely escape their notice.

Mikulov, already proficient with physical weapons, had sufficiently mastered both his mind and spirit to do something extraordinary. His test, he knew, would likely be upon him soon. When the stern, unyielding face of Vedenin arrived and stared down into his own on the practice field, Mikulov grasped that the likelihood had just become a certainty.

In the days that followed, Mikulov pushed himself to master this newly discovered ability so he could summon the power at will.

The force came more rapidly and reliably when he concentrated entirely on the intended effect. His initial contact had been clumsy and awkward and so maddeningly brief—had it been a physical thing, he would have fumbled it through his fingers and

dropped it—but it nevertheless taught him that he could draw forth that power and direct it, even magnify it.

He devised his own drill and put himself through it relentlessly.

Fasten your mind firmly on the need to release the power through the blade itself. Concentrate on that requirement. Focus your determination; let your yearning to release that energy flow outward from your mind to every fiber of your body and your spirit.

After achieving a few further, if limited, successes, he learned that the key was not concentration alone.

You must concentrate yet never hurry, move without haste but with fixed determination.

He sought always to remember that because the power of the gods was a gift, rushing their largesse was vain and disrespectful.

The gods will grant you what you need when you require it. Your duty is simple, to be focused in the instant the gods choose.

Details of how the initiates' trials were composed remained among the monastery's most closely guarded secrets. Those who failed were immediately cast out, but the few who succeeded were sequestered in diligent study, often decades of it, no longer accessible to their curious younger counterparts.

Still, rumors of general rules emerged.

Along with a single weapon of their choice—in Mikulov's case, the choice was hardly an issue; it must be the punch dagger—the initiates were granted one mantra, inscribed on a scroll by the masters, to carry with them. It could be of whatever nature they chose. Try

as he might, Mikulov could not decide which one to select. Each night he tossed and turned and taxed his mind as he sought the ever-elusive answer.

What will be essential to my survival?

In the end, the choice was determined not by thinking but by fear.

When he stood before the assembled masters of the Floating Sky Monastery, he was offered a vast array of scrolls. Because the sun had not yet risen, the scrolls glowed in torchlight. Some were voluminous; others were barely larger than his little finger; a few were ornately bound and sealed with intricate insignia.

"The purpose of your ordeal," Vedenin said (and naturally it was Vedenin who challenged him), "is to prove your ability to submit your mind, your weapon, and your spirit to the will of the gods. To turn away from your own altar and bow down at theirs." The smirk on his outwardly benign face bespoke how little faith the man held in the novitiate.

When Mikulov hesitated, he felt the masters' judgment from within the walls, and from without, lurking uncertainties and physical dangers. His vacillation gave way to what became in that moment an obvious pick: the healing mantra.

With the rolled parchment, he was handed a folded sheet of paper, sealed with an impression of the monastery's sigil in wax. His directive was clear: open the paper seven days hence, after a week of prayer and meditation, during which he was to prepare himself. Only at sunrise on the eighth day was he to break the wax seal and receive further instructions.

At dawn, Mikulov emerged from the sanctuary. Instinctively, he strode east, deeper into the mountains surrounding Ivgorod. He carried only the scroll and the folded paper, and at his hip, the punch dagger in its sheath. He had no food, for it was to be a week of fasting, and no water, for anyone who could not find the means to slake his thirst could never hope to achieve the wisdom required of monks of the Floating Sky Monastery.

Should he prove unable to locate water in the first week of his trial, so it would be. He would have failed—and died—before so much as hearing the voices of the gods, let alone striving to do as they willed.

The week began in calm and tranquility. Mikulov made water his first priority, and so he traveled toward a ridge of steep hills he had seen for years from his dormitory window, a range that ultimately met the Kohl Mountains to the south. He felt confident of finding a stream at the base, though he had no reason to be sure other than that water would always find its way downhill.

He could hear the masters telling him that the gods often spoke thus, through the mix of knowledge, instinct, and intuition that was the adept's method of thought. His confidence was rewarded: at the base of the range lay a tarn, its water dark but clear, fed by a trickle descending through massive rocks. Showing obeisance in the direction of the gift, Mikulov drank deep to refresh after a long day's walking and to replenish for the week ahead. He was happy to have made the discovery so quickly, for he knew it was likely the most important of his trial; in the punishing summer heat, water was his essential need.

He chose to look for shelter near the water, for staying close to the source of the gods' munificence seemed in keeping with a grateful heart.

In the mountains, he knew darkness fell swiftly, and he soon found a stretch of ground less hard than others, beneath an overhanging rock. These, too, he recognized as gifts, and he gave thanks before he lay down.

Waking, he established the routine he would observe for the next six days. He went to the tarn and washed away the previous day's trek. This was the year's hottest month, when even the nights remained harshly uncomfortable. He would be sweating with no exertion whatsoever, and Mikulov wanted to approach the gods each day clean and unstained. At the faintest hint of light, he stepped into the water and submerged. He held his breath for as long as he could, praying to the gods all the while that he might be worthy of them. He bathed and renewed the prayer with each successive dawn.

He expected the days to pass in contemplative calm and silence. He felt utterly tranquil and completely at peace, having seen no obstacles to surmount, no predators he must vanquish. In the stillness of his time alone, he spoke not a word.

Yet the week was far from quiet, for Gachev came to visit, and Gachev was, as he had always been, loud.

On the fourth day, when the sun was at its zenith and the temperature brutally hot, his fellow orphan first spoke to him. Mikulov had made it his practice to stay close to his resting area, its overhang providing him with many hours of shade even at the sun's apex, near an abundant supply of water. He knew that the longer he spent in direct sunlight, the more he would deplete himself. He emerged from shadow only as needed and walked to the pool, restoring the water that had flowed out of him in the heat of both day and night. Despite his precautions, he was soon feeling the effects of slow dehydration.

It was in Mikulov's first moment of apprehension, stretching toward doubt, that the taunting voice spoke to him.

"What makes you think you can succeed where I failed?"

Mikulov opened his eyes and peered out of the shadow. Across his campsite, splayed out in direct sunlight, lay Gachev, clad in the clothes he had worn the day he left the monastery. He looked no different. How, after so many months in the mountains, could Gachev's tunic not be tattered and his skin not be filthy and raw? Yet he reclined at his ease, as if relaxed by the blistering heat, and observed Mikulov casually. "My first day here, I was miserable, too, sure I would never experience another instant of joy. Yet the sight of other fools trying to survive these hellish weeks in the wild taught me to laugh again." Raising an eyebrow as if in dismay, he studied Mikulov. "Heartily," he added.

Mikulov was so surprised that he nearly spoke aloud.

He was under no vow of silence, though it was understood that only in stillness would the gods allow themselves to be heard. So despite the mockery, Mikulov held his tongue. He merely stared at Gachev through the sweat that stung his eyes, this boy who should have been dead.

This boy, or this apparition? Given his unchanged appearance and the soundless stealth of his approach, Mikulov considered that Gachev might be a figment of his imagination, a mirage conjured by heat and isolation.

When Gachev spoke further, his voice lost its taunting edge, and his words touched a fear so well hidden it shocked Mikulov. Speaking flatly, Gachev said, "None of us succeeds. No novitiate has ever come through their trial. None ever will."

Days of hunger quickly turned to days of mind-rending doubt, every sensation made worse by Gachev's wry commentary. The implications of what Gachev said, and said repeatedly, fed a rising desire to break the seal and undertake his trial prematurely, or even to tear the folded paper, unopened, to shreds. Mikulov began to venture farther from his sheltering rock and the tarn, but Gachev was always nearby, laughing mirthlessly at the other boy's efforts to maintain his vigil.

Over the days, the mockery and questioning bred all-too-plausible theories. The masters of the Floating Sky Monastery never advanced anyone from among the younger, rebellious ranks; acolytes never became monks. The masters were, after all, inordinately selective when choosing which monks to accept. As submissive acolytes completed their studies, they served merely as free labor until they became too much trouble, at which point they were sent off on deadly trials, to be replaced by a new generation of gullible devotees. Was that how the Floating Sky Monastery had survived throughout the centuries?

Mikulov understood that his fears were running away with him, making his mind see portents and schemes that didn't exist. He sought to refute the doubt by recalling some orphan who had returned victorious from his or her testing, but could not. It was said that those who succeeded were separated from their former fellows so as to eliminate the least distraction from higher studies, which were to be their reward for years to come.

Gachev's insinuations made sense.

"You are a fool, Mikulov," he said. "You are proud and impulsive and weak. Your actions out here will not make you a monk. They will only lead you to the anonymous grave you will share with your brethren."

The ominous pronouncement called to mind Vedenin's countless dire predictions that Mikulov's actions would bring disgrace on himself and his fellow novitiates. Now, as then, Mikulov chose to believe otherwise, taking in once more Gachev's unsoiled appearance and the echo of the words of his most unrelenting master. Together, their admonitions named the dread Mikulov harbored: not death, but shame before death. The boy who would be a monk decided Gachev was a figment of his imagination, an illusory companion to remind him of his loneliness through this preparatory week in the mountains.

His taunts are my own fears given voice.

And so, for the final day, whenever Gachev opened his mouth, Mikulov hardened his heart against him. Gachev mocked him for his efforts, but Mikulov told himself the boy was no more than a chimera born of sweat and pain and unbanished doubt. By the seventh day of his ordeal, Mikulov had made Gachev unreal.

But then the boy saved his life.

The more Mikulov anticipated the next morning, when he would break the wax seal and receive his instructions, the more he longed to seize his destiny at the first possible moment. He would greet the day from the very summit of the mountain, where dawn would come earlier than below. Though it would be an arduous journey up a stony incline, the challenge seemed worth it, if only to end his agony a few minutes sooner.

And so he embarked. The sun was past its zenith, yet the heat persisted and seemed only to worsen. Still he began his ascent, to arrive at the peak with plenty of daylight left and to spend his final night of prayer and meditation closer to the gods. He gave little

thought to water, for the route he had charted would keep him close to the trickle that fed the tarn in his camp.

Gachev let pass no opportunity to tell him he had set out unprepared.

At first Mikulov was confident water would remain accessible as he rose higher, but inevitably the heat and his exertions made his tongue swell from thirst. He was tempted to return, but when he looked back and saw how much closer he was to the summit than to camp, he pressed on.

"This is ridiculous, all this effort."

Mikulov, his breath now coming in gasps, ignored his unwanted companion. "You rush toward nothing but an earlier death."

Each rock sought to wrench Mikulov's ankle, each fissure to trap and hobble a foot. "You provide the gods with nothing but amusement."

So enfeebled was Mikulov by the sun and his exhaustion that he feared succumbing to the dangers of the terrain. If he broke a bone, he would be forced to use his healing mantra prematurely and would be left unprepared at a time of greater need.

"The thousand and one gods are powerless."

Hearing that unforgivable insult, Mikulov felt the impulse to vent his fury but remembered another of Vedenin's litany of admonitions: *The gods are in all things, both physical and spiritual.* If so, then they must also be in Mikulov's rage, which provided him newfound energy to shout at Gachev. This was energy to be channeled and utilized, not squandered on a wraith. *Do not swallow the anger or cast it away. Feel it. Use it.*

With a new source to draw upon, Mikulov drove himself upward.

He reached the summit as night fell, a promontory that ended in a cliff. So enervated was he that he could spare no time to look for a site to rest. Squinting past the fierce burning in his eyes, he crawled far enough away from the edge that he had no fear of falling, and collapsed to the stony surface.

He awoke in cold darkness. Stiffness in his joints told him he had not moved. Several attempts were necessary to open his eyes, and when he did, he saw Gachev sitting on a nearby rock, shaking his head in precious silence. When first light brought a soft blue to the eastern horizon, Mikulov made a move to rise but could not. Sleep had made little difference. He was depleted. Mikulov lay under the sky and contemplated his circumstance. The sun would crest the horizon soon, but he felt nothing, cut off from his body. Strangely, he did not even feel the familiar morning compulsion to relieve himself. This he took as a bad sign. His body lacked the water it needed to survive out in the mountains; he had failed to bolster himself for these extreme conditions. His thoughts were an echo of Vedenin's curse: *You will fail before you have even begun.* Mikulov added his own, silent imprecation.

"Yes," Gachev agreed, voicing the words in Mikulov's mind. "You are a fool."

Once more, anger came. *He wants me to fail*, Mikulov thought, but he directed his fury again. Despite his body's pain, Mikulov used his rage to rise. As he got to his feet, the first rays of dawn touched his brow.

He paused while dizziness passed, looked down, and saw the folded paper in his hand. It had been secure in his tunic pocket for seven days, and he had no memory of retrieving it. His fingers shook as he struggled to insert them beneath the fold at the seal.

He was shamed by the effort it took to break the lump of wax. He closed his eyes for just a moment, then spread the paper wide to read its contents.

Inside.

Mikulov was suddenly too tired to feel even anger. The paper bore just one word? What sort of nonsense was this? "Inside" was no instruction; it was a mistake. His masters had erred, perhaps muddling what they were supposed to give him with a more mundane order for another boy in their service. Even at that moment one of his fellow orphans, expecting to find the directions for his daily chores, might instead be marveling at the meticulous instructions for Mikulov's ordeal in the wilds. The absurdity of the idea was comic. It threatened to undo him, leaving him frenzied and bewildered there on the mountaintop. Mikulov suppressed the hard mirth that rose within him. His laughter would only give Gachev satisfaction.

He dared not affront the gods. This message could not have come in error. He racked his brain to see how this word fit his circumstances. He must be overlooking something.

Inside.

As his mind formed the question *Inside what?* Mikulov's eyes fell on what looked like the mouth of a cave. It opened in the rock half a hundred paces below, on the side of the summit opposite the one he had climbed. Jutting up out of the incline's face, roofed by an intricately wrought arch no more than an arm's length across, the cave's mouth beckoned him.

Inside.

How could his masters have known he would ascend this mountain? They had given no instructions about what direction to walk. He'd been sent out guided only by instinct.

Vedenin's words from Mikulov's youth came unbidden to his mind. *What you sense as instinct is rather the gods' divine direction.* Had his travels been steered by communication he had not known he heard? If so, it stood to reason that his masters, too, had been so guided, preparing this one-word message without knowing what, when the moment came, it would mean to the novitiate undergoing the trial.

The portal offered no answers. The morning's rays, descending the slope below him, quickly warmed the surrounding rock. This day, he saw, would be yet more intense, more searing than before. Whether it was the place the gods had ordained for his trial or merely blind chance, Mikulov knew the cave would provide protection from the heat, if nothing else.

Exhaustion and volition warring within his depleted muscles, Mikulov awkwardly stumbled downward. Gravity more than will carried him to the portal. Knowing nothing of what lay in the darkness, Mikulov lurched forward and let it gather him in. *Inside*.

Only dimly did he wonder why Gachev remained behind.

As he moved down, the impression he got of his surroundings was of inconceivability; these halls could not exist. That they had been hewn—no, intricately carved from the gutrock of this mountain—was hard enough to ken, yet the fact that he could still see, now deep beneath the surface, was even more difficult. At first, following the rough stairs' descent, he assumed daylight was filtering through, though after what must have been one hundred paces downward, he knew this could not be. Even the fierce sunlight of the mountaintop was too weak to penetrate this far, and hidden shafts or unseen clefts in the rock could not account for this strange illumination. Finally, a long and

level hallway stretching out before him, Mikulov understood that what his eyes beheld was utterly different from any of these notions, though every bit as impossible: the walls themselves contained a soft glow that surged within them.

What is this? Mikulov asked. He studied the stone of the walls around him. The light did flow indeed, like blood. The illumination moved in a steady rhythm, pulsations following the beat of his own heart.

What hell have I blithely entered?

Mikulov asked himself if what he had witnessed thus far aligned with what he knew about the gods' behavior. *I know that the gods speak to us through signs*, *both in nature and through the works of men*. *Further, the gods are in all things*, he thought, and the light within the stone seemed to fairly scream that it was the work of the gods. Therefore these steps, this hall—clearly hewn by men—must be a manifestation of the gods' will. Seeing nothing to contradict this, Mikulov took a moment to ponder their message.

Concentration was difficult; thirst kept intruding into his thoughts, and even though he stood motionless, his thigh muscles shook with strain. The deprivation he had endured for seven days and nights had taken a deep toll on his body, and therefore on his mind as well. Even when he exerted a tremendous effort to suppress his discomfort, he still could not focus.

His thoughts returned to Gachev, Mikulov at last wondering why the boy had not followed him down. And the more he exhorted himself to ponder the gods' message, the farther into his concentration Gachev seemed to run. The boy had anticipated, even savored, Mikulov's disappointment for days, so how could he now forgo the chance to revel in the novitiate's confusion and imminent failure?

Mikulov turned his face upward to the smallest flicker of light at the top of the stairs he had just descended. Craning his neck to see past outcroppings of stone, Mikulov saw his tormentor. The older boy stood solemnly, silently staring down at him. No barbs, no jibes, no provocation. Simply mute vigil. Gachev seemed to defend the stairs from anything that might follow Mikulov to his doom.

Or did he bar Mikulov's ascent back to open air and daylight?

Seeing Gachev so distant above, sensing how far into the dark depths of the mountain he had come, Mikulov was afraid. He gestured to Gachev. Pointing ahead to the shadows of the hall, he beckoned the older boy to follow.

Gachev remained where he stood. He merely shook his head. His words, "This test is yours," fell to Mikulov like rain, heavy and cold. "I go no farther."

A lump forming in his throat, Mikulov turned back to face the hallway. He concentrated once more on the light that seemed to live within the walls. The pulsations' rhythm, though soft, came to him as sound, not just as sight. Studying this, Mikulov saw and heard how the beats indicated a direction toward the shadows at the corridor's end. Although this was not the sign he had hoped for, he knew it for what it was: a clear suggestion to go forward. Mikulov forced his limbs into action and stepped haltingly toward the darkness to which the moving light summoned him.

He anticipated a labyrinth waiting for him, or a baleful necropolis that would rise up and swallow him, but Mikulov soon found himself at the entrance to an empty chamber paved with stone blocks. Although the room, so deep into the mountain, had no other door, it shone with a nacreous light in a vast array of colors, all of them tinged with red. The room held the most wondrous display of subtle shades of a single hue, reds Mikulov had

never seen or imagined, offset and emphasized by occasional shoots of green lichen growing between the stones. The color suffused the light, its burning beat now pounding from the walls.

Can this be my test? *There is nothing here*.

As Mikulov lifted his foot to step into the chamber, Gachev's voice rose around him. "Will you so blithely stumble into a room with no way out?"

Mikulov was tempted to look back in the direction from which he had come, but he knew Gachev had not followed. The voice was in his mind, the voice of his fear.

He weighed that fear against everything he believed to be true. Having trusted thus far that the gods had been sending him signs, he would not change course now. Mikulov stepped boldly onto the room's stone floor.

No bars dropped into place behind him; no water flooded the chamber, nor did the walls move to crush him. Instead, the coruscating energy they contained beat with a regular rhythm. The direction of the pulse ceased as he entered the room. He was where the gods wanted him to be.

But what was he here to do?

He waited. Even with the walls keeping time, he lost any sense of how long he had stood in place, for his circumstances, moment to moment or hour to hour, were maddeningly the same. He had followed his instincts, what he took for the will of the gods, yet Mikulov had come, exhausted, to a dead end. The blood in his temples reignited as the pace of his heart increased. His anger brought back his awareness of time. He'd been standing here an eternity. Frustration told him to leave the chamber immediately.

Still, something stayed him. He looked into his mind and saw the face of Vedenin, smirking at his arrival at the monastery gates, wrapped in a mantle of failure. He would not endure such shame, even if he had to wait infinite eternities. The gods would speak, but in their own time, not in a mere novitiate's.

The radiance around him took on a somber quality. *Abide the gods' determinations*, it seemed to say. *Be still and await their will*.

Patience had never been Mikulov's best attribute. He forced his knees to bend and assumed a submissive posture on the floor. When the ache grew too much for his enervated body, he silently voiced words to calm his spirit and separate himself from pain. *Pain, be welcome in my home. You shall not live here long, yet while you stay with me, I receive you like an honored guest.*

For what seemed an age, Mikulov stayed thus. It was a losing battle. The throbbing soreness pervaded his consciousness and kept him rooted to this plane, not the gods'. Sweat poured into his eyes, dripping freely onto his bare knees where he knelt on the stone. The throb and the drip distracted him, intruding into the walls' lulling rhythm. The steady pulsation became like Gachev's taunts. Mikulov was besieged by unrelenting sameness: light beating within the walls, stones glistening with a dank sheen, moisture seeping from their gaps, hanging lichen that swayed—

Swayed?

Mikulov blinked and tried to recall everything he had seen in the last several moments. Yes, he perceived a small and subtle alteration to the chamber's oppressive monotony. He sought furiously to identify this variation.

Had the green shoots of feeble, tenacious life been swaying when he'd first knelt down? If so, how? There was not the slightest current in the air.

As he stared at them, Mikulov was certain. *No, they were still when I entered*. He soon beheld what put the hanging strands in motion.

Murky and insubstantial vapor leaked between the bricks before his eyes. Hovering in the air above him, it was frail enough to be banished with a breath, yet it conveyed an impression of substance and menace. Mikulov saw minute vibrations ripple through it, echoes of the pulsations of light within the walls.

Impossibly, the thing seemed to be taking form from the source of that nacreous light, and something within it festered, for it now dripped with contagion.

There was a new mix of colors in the room—yellow, green, and blue, yet sickly shades of each. The colors, and whatever gave them form, oozed together and coalesced. The impression of disease growing stronger as he watched, Mikulov's mind struggled with a concept that would encompass this seeping presence: it was an abscess. The heart of the undulating mass challenged his perception, its very center seemingly a void. This was a *wound*, Mikulov grasped, a gash long and thin, hanging in the air. It confronted both his senses and his expectations, for it was not vaguely human in shape, or a malformed blob, or even a cloud-like apparition. Instead, it was a disembodied lesion suspended in midair. But there was no body, no flesh to have received this injury. Rather, it was as though the air itself had been hacked savagely by some unseen weapon. He considered any blade that could produce such a laceration and reached instinctively for the punch dagger at his side.

As Mikulov stood paralyzed, his hand poised above his weapon's grip, the lesion pulsated, expectant. In his physically depleted condition, Mikulov felt overwhelmed by it,

threatened by its existence. An affront to the reality he understood, the gash was clearly alive, a mystical being sent to rend Mikulov's sanity as violently as the air had been rent by a blade.

When the apparition moved, Mikulov backed away from it. Fascinated in equal measure to his revulsion, Mikulov was not aware that he was being maneuvered and so was slow to act. When the knowledge dawned on him, Mikulov grasped the punch dagger in his right fist and aimed it at the lesion. Once he had done so, the attitude of the floating wound shifted; it countered the boy's movements, advancing or retreating in a macabre dance with the weapon. Its feints and withdrawals, Mikulov saw too late, gave it a position that put him at a great disadvantage. The lesion now blocked the door, the only way out of this room.

Mikulov looked all around, reassuring himself that there were no more of these things seeping from the walls. The weakness in his legs, back, and shoulders was too intense to ignore; his strength and stamina were finite and rapidly reaching their ends. Stalemates were not the monks' way at the Floating Sky Monastery. The masters taught their adepts to seek solutions to life's problems, not remain mired in them. He must pass this test as soon as possible, while strength endured. *The lesion's threatening posture be damned*, Mikulov thought as he abruptly raced toward the exit from the chamber.

The apparition prevented him. Not satisfied to merely block his way, it launched itself at him in return and dealt Mikulov a savage attack. It seemed to strike him with its entire being. The lesion's touch was wet, and it burned. The novitiate was furious at himself for being taken off guard. Despite his last-moment attempt to duck away, he had taken the blow on his cheek, and he felt a viscid wetness trickle down his neck. His heart clenched at

the thought he had been infected. He snatched at the tunic that hung from his shoulders and mopped up the rank liquid, but its burn lingered. Thrown back, he could feel its presence everywhere, the gory sickness of it on his skin, even dripping from his lank, oily hair. Sprawled on the floor, he belatedly raised his punch dagger to fend off any subsequent attack, and doing so, he instantly felt foolish. Why had he not led with the weapon?

He would correct that mistake now. He struggled to his feet and hurled himself at the foul apparition. Yet so swiftly did the being counterstrike that, although Mikulov was prepared, he managed to use the weapon in its simplest way only: he sliced the contagion savagely but without a release of energy. Overwhelmed with fear, Mikulov had failed to focus and channel his spirit, the power he had never before so urgently needed to call on.

As he scrambled back, expecting a follow-up blow, he measured the blade's effect. Even his feeble use of the dagger was sufficient. The spectral form shook and seemed to wither. The rent in the air was even larger than before, and from its unseen font, the wound bled, spattering the stones beneath. Mikulov stared in horror, for as it bled and suffered, it grew before his eyes. With his blood pounding in his temples, still feeling the adrenaline from his last attack, he knew this was his opportunity, now, while the creature paused to gather itself; he must strike again, this moment! And so he thrust his blade before him once more, and this time, he focused his mind to summon the energy he needed.

This trial was pivotal and clearly a test of his prowess as much as his resourcefulness. Somewhere in its execution, this encounter was essential in demonstrating to the masters that he was worthy of further study, and by the thousand and one gods, he would prove it.

But to his shame, he was not immediately successful. Although harnessing the power had become instinctive on the practice grounds of the Floating Sky Monastery, this was no longer practice. *Concentrate*, he berated himself. *Focus on its release*. He listed the steps in his mind swiftly but with desperation. *Fasten your mind on the requirement*. *Focus your determination; let your yearning release the energy from every inch of your body*. Yet so great was his need that he forgot the process could not be rushed, forgot that he must move without haste, only with determination. Therefore, his attack was impotent, mundane, unaided by power.

Until the last moment, that was. Ultimately the lesion gathered itself to strike again, and it was Mikulov's fear of counterattack that drew the energy forth. It came the instant he felt the creature start to riposte; the panic at his inability to fend it off beckoned the energy within his blade, and a brief pulse of power lanced outward in all directions. Shocked by its arrival, Mikulov lost control and was blown backward by its force.

His skull struck the floor viciously as he rolled, and though he instinctively tried to rise, he paused for a very long while, his head hung low, spinning wildly. What had happened to his prowess with the blade? Was his mastery of it all in his imagination? Or were the intensity and danger of this test simply too much for him? And though he could not see for himself how badly he had been injured, a glance at his opponent proved it had not been a one-sided encounter.

As horrid as it appeared, Mikulov was stunned by a single fact, immediate and nightmarish: it was even larger and more pestilent than before.

The lesion now towered over him. It was hot and inflamed; every visible inch of it burned; it fairly glowed with violation. The lines of shredded flesh were not clean, as

though sliced by a blade, but instead were jagged and torn, as though pulled apart by hand. The creature seethed violently, unseen, ragged breaths heaving inside it. The sense of wrongness was even more pronounced, and for the first time, Mikulov found it difficult to breathe, as though every intake sullied his lungs with contagion. And worst of all, the lesion's tattered guts leaked burning acid everywhere now. Mikulov slipped on a spill, and its touch was fire.

Mikulov's mind reached out, and instead of locating his determination, he embraced the font of his fury and discovered it was a teeming lake within him. Yet after his experience climbing to the summit with Gachev, he knew that even rage was a gift of the gods. Turning away from mindless abandon, he mastered his wrath and channeled it.

The blade's outburst was pure, and Mikulov's aim was true. A great, heaving gout of white-hot, incendiary flame shot forth, more potent than any he had achieved before. Knocking both combatants backward, power leapt from the blade like personified wrath. The wave of force pulsed outward until it broke upon the chamber's walls and folded back on itself, hitting Mikulov and the lesion from two sides simultaneously. The boy who dreamt of becoming a monk became lost momentarily in the conflagration, ultimately finding himself on his back, opening his eyes in weakness and shock.

Breaths came in gasps, and he was grateful for life. Unquestionably that had been enough; surely the creature had been vanquished. He wanted to turn his head to see yet couldn't. Powerless, Mikulov felt despair's bitter bite as the lesion floated into view overhead. The creature was vile, and it was larger and stronger than ever. How was this possible? Were the gods toying with him? He gazed once more at the dripping entrails and saw that where they hit the stones, they sizzled and spattered. Even the force of its excreta

had grown more potent. It was as though he were feeding a fire rather than extinguishing it.

And Mikulov had nothing left. So spent was he that when the creature dripped its corruption upon him, the searing flares of agony he felt could not draw forth enough energy for him even to flinch. He saw his fate with absolute clarity: a lingering death mired in disease and suffering.

"You are foolish," he heard a voice say. "You are proud and impulsive and weak." Mikulov knew who it was. *Gachev, come to see my end at last*. Only the smallest portion of his mind remained strong enough to wonder, *What happened to him going no farther than the entrance above?* He assumed it was merely a memory, his own fears given voice at his most vulnerable moment, and dismissed it. But Gachev would not stop.

"You will bring shame on your brethren, not merely on those you left at the monastery but on all who have faced this test before you." The words seared into him, for he knew them to be correct. In his pride, Mikulov had dared to think he would succeed where so many before him had failed, but he was no different. "Focusing on your meager pain prevents you from hearing the gods." Yes, it was true; Mikulov still could not hear them above his agony, had never truly heard them. Even his choice of a mantra to bring with him—had he but spent more time seeking the gods' guidance, he would have made another, better selection. He would have based his choice on offense, an arcane onslaught that would annihilate the lesion utterly. "If you follow your impulses rather than the gods, then you will never save me." He saw how foolish he'd been; how could healing save him now? It would merely prolong his agony, reviving him for another attack that would only make the creature larger…

Mikulov's thoughts faltered as Gachev's words sank in. *You will never save me*. What did he mean, *save* him?

"If you follow your impulses, you will die too."

My impulses. Mikulov looked down. The healing scroll was in the pocket of his torn and shredded tunic, and when he drew it forth, he saw that the parchment was charred and stained, almost ruined by conflagration and power before it had even been used.

His eyes rose once more to the infernal abomination floating above him, the horrid, base lesion that rent the very air of this dismal chamber, the wound that kept growing and growing and growing.

And in that instant, Mikulov understood.

Indeed, he would *not* follow his own impulses.

Blackened fingers trembling, he broke open the scroll and read from it. "Jaz vay pozdravju." The words were obscure, unwieldy on his tongue. "Prelusjem váz dobrey." One hand made gestures he had learned from the masters, though in his weakness those movements were flawed and his concentration was imperfect. "Vimenju te teysoč in enje bogev obnovium vasz." The single thing Mikulov achieved with perfection: the words and gestures were aimed with precision at the lesion floating above him, rather than at himself.

As he lay on the floor, his strength slowly ebbing, it made sense. The creature's very nature seemed to cry out for this action. Was it possible to rid oneself of a wound by striking it? No, that would merely create a bigger wound. To rid himself of a wound could be accomplished only by *healing* it.

His deeds had been irrational, dangerously so. In retrospect, Mikulov recognized that the creature had not once initiated an attack. Rather, it simply countered his own.

Mikulov felt foolish for leaping to conclusions and fearing the creature's mysterious, macabre intent. Other than warding the chamber's exit, it had never made any offensive movement.

Of course. A wound itself was not aggressive; the person who dealt it was.

As his mouth formed the final words and the scroll turned to dust in his hands, Mikulov raised his eyes and saw that the wound's ragged edges had been stitched together cleanly, saw that the viscid suppuration had lessened, saw that the massive creature was now smaller, so much smaller, yet it remained potent, livid, and most important, still poised in the chamber's exit. When he accepted the evidence of his eyes, Mikulov's heart sank, for the mantra's effectiveness was at its end. His mind clung desperately to the unfathomable words that were already fading from his memory.

The mantra was not enough, and he had no others. Silently, he shouted in wild supplication, mentally aiming it at the gods, *Please, answer me in my need!*

The desperation caused a door in his mind to open. He heard a voice lecturing him, *Fasten your mind firmly on the need,* and understood distantly that they were his own words from his days on the practice field. *Concentrate on that requirement.* And requirement it was, for he would never leave this chamber alive if he failed to vanquish this supernatural aberration. No, not vanquish, *heal* it. *Let your yearning to release that energy flow outward from your mind to every fiber of your body and your spirit.*

Mikulov expelled all stray thoughts from his consciousness and focused wholly on the necessity to heal this blight. He performed any small act he could think of, no matter how meaningless. He lifted his hands to the creature. He moved his lips in unintelligible speech, mumbling words that were vaguely comforting and reassuring, and when he saw

how low it hovered above him, he stretched out his arms and embraced the creature, feeling energy flow through him to it. Finally, after seemingly endless minutes of excruciating concentration, his eyes closed and his arms slumped to the floor as exhaustion overcame him.

He lay insensate, too weak to move. Sleep claimed him at last, a gossamer kiss upon his brow.

He knew not how long he lay there, nor did he know how it came to be that he recovered enough strength to open his eyes and lift his head, but finally he did so and saw that he was alone. Nothing floated above him or menaced him in any way. Long he waited, yet at last he accepted what his instincts told him. The lesion was no more. The wound, healed, was gone.

Rising to an elbow, he beheld a second, smaller room he had not seen before, hardly larger than a monk's cell at the monastery; apparently, healing the lesion had triggered this chamber's opening. Within, Mikulov found sustenance—a pitcher of water to slake his thirst and salted meat to nourish his body. As weak as he was, Mikulov took no joy in replenishing himself. Instead, he ate and drank slowly, passionlessly, each moment spent contemplating all he had learned. He examined the hidden chamber and pondered the instrument that provided for its concealment. Power it was, clearly, perhaps prepared by the masters, crafted to thrive in perpetuity. Mikulov could feel it with his nascent abilities; his trial this day had thrown a door wide open within his mind, and he found he could now sense the force of the gods where it flowed, to a minor degree at least. And as he mechanically chewed the tough meat and washed it down with water, he peered around

the room and discovered that more power surrounded him than he had initially thought. Far more.

Swallowing, he tightened his scrutiny.

Mikulov understood instinctively that the summoning of a mystical being such as the lesion required both control and command; its appearance must coincide roughly with that of new arrivals from the monastery, while its disappearance—depending on whether it had been healed—must signal the opening of the inner chamber to nourish the victor.

Or carry away the corpse of the vanquished.

Not only could Mikulov feel the power, but he now recognized its purpose as well: concealment. The masters had hidden something else down here. Mikulov's heart began to pound as he contemplated what it could be, but he instantly imposed calm upon his thoughts and emotions, reminding himself of the means through which the monks of the Floating Sky Monastery could channel the force of the gods—a balanced spirit.

Without haste, Mikulov breathed deeply and evenly, and when he was completely at peace, he reached out and touched the power and, with a wave of his hand, bid it, *Begone*.

Thus was another chamber laid bare, and the corpses of his fellow novitiates that lay within.

Many there were, all of them stark, gruesome in their decay, yet plaintive as well, bereft in their abandonment. Given how few novitiates underwent this challenge, the bodies in this chamber—some were skeletons thick with dust; others, desiccated corpses in various stages of decomposition—must represent all of the rebellious children who'd dreamt of becoming monks since ages past. His eyes took each of them in, and he finally

found one that captured his attention, for it was apparently more recent than the others, and larger as well.

Gachev was always taller than the rest of us.

Looking into his former tormentor's eyes, Mikulov recalled hearing the boy's voice in his mind. *If you follow your impulses rather than the gods, then you will never save me.* At the time, Mikulov had been confused by the use of the word *save*, but he understood it now.

In truth, Mikulov realized, *by that warning*, *Gachev saved* me.

Like their bodies lying in a heap within the hidden chamber, had the spirits of all those children been trapped? Was that what Gachev meant by *save*? If so, they were trapped no longer. After the provisions had restored vitality to his body and mind, Mikulov returned to the surface to locate a suitable spot. He was not surprised that Gachev was not waiting for him, but he felt lonely nonetheless.

He would never be able to assemble sufficient wood for a funeral pyre, not for so many bodies, but he hoped it would be enough that they emerged from their hidden chamber and experienced the heat of the sun once more upon their bones before being laid to their enduring rest.

Long it took him to carry them in his arms; many trips he was forced to make, and it was well past nightfall when he finished. He carried out Gachev after all the rest and laid his body atop the others. He rested for the night, for he was in no hurry. Finally the morning came, and after they felt the sun's kiss one last time, Mikulov covered them with stones, creating a massive monument to the monastery's dead. He spoke no words over it when he was done. He felt capable of none. Instead, he turned and staggered in the direction of home, bidding a brief farewell to the former novitiates, his lost brothers and sisters.

It was a day and a half after his victory when Mikulov made his triumphant, unhurried return to the Floating Sky Monastery. The sun had long since passed its zenith and seemed to plummet toward the western horizon, but it still illuminated the portal through which he had departed. There, he found Vedenin, hunched and wizened, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Mikulov had the impression that he had stood vigil thus for many hours, though the scowl on his face appeared to give the ancient monk strength.

"It has been more than a full day since the test was finished," he said, and in those words Mikulov indeed learned a great deal. As he had suspected, the lesion's disappearance had signaled an end to the test, which not only triggered the hidden portal's opening but alerted the masters as well. They had been waiting all this time.

"The rest of my brethren grew tired; therefore only I remain," Vedenin said. *Of course*, Mikulov thought. *How could he pass up an opportunity to criticize my performance against the lesion*? *It must pain him enormously that I return in triumph*.

Mikulov walked slowly and silently toward him. "I had much to do, my brother," he said, and though his voice was hoarse from nine days of disuse, still he took tremendous satisfaction out of the new honorific he used. No longer was the old man *Master* Vedenin, but brother, for Mikulov had earned the right to be a monk of the Floating Sky Monastery. Yet he knew that his education had only just begun, that the masters often spent decades instructing new monks, so he was careful not to inflect his voice with brashness or pride; instead, he spoke to Vedenin with all proper respect.

And just enough self-righteous rage to prevent the older monk from responding.

"I found a great deal more than food and water in the hidden chamber," Mikulov continued, and he saw the monk's eyes widen slightly.

"Enough to occupy you for a night and a day?" the old man said, his indignation apparently not quite as justified as his anger moments ago.

Mikulov gazed deeply into the man's eyes and never wavered. At long last he nodded and said, "Indeed there was, for there is little wood in the mountains, and I had many of my brethren to bury."

The memory was fresh in his mind, and from the stunned look on Vedenin's face, it must have been visible on his own visage as well.

Vedenin and his fellow masters might or might not have believed Mikulov would succeed, but clearly they had not intended for him to discover the hidden dead.

Mikulov pushed past Vedenin. It was neither hasty nor brusque, yet it brought the old monk out of his shocked reverie. "You are late and your studies await," the man barked behind him. "You will go to the lyceum immediately."

Mikulov shook his head wearily, all of his labors suddenly burdening him at once. "Not yet, Vedenin," he said. "First, I will eat; then I will bathe."

The monk's eyes narrowed in fury, and it was with visible effort that he maintained even a semblance of his usual authority. "You will address me as…" He faltered. "As Brother Vedenin."

Mikulov allowed himself a smile. *Oh, how it must gall him to be unable to say* master, he mused. *How he must hate the fact we are now brothers*. But then a new thought struck him, and his smile faded. *I am one of the youngest to ever become a monk*. Gratitude overcame him.

"Study I shall, Brother," he said with genuine humility and respect. "But I reek of the dead and would not insult the gods by approaching them so befouled. First I shall eat; then I shall bathe, and then I shall study." He would not be baited, and his days of accepting condescension were over. And while the old man sputtered, Mikulov walked away, offering over his shoulder, "Good night, Brother."

On his return to the Floating Sky Monastery, Mikulov had thought long and hard about the loneliness that had suffused his life, and realized that with his success in the mountains, he had at last gained the family he had sought for so many years. Yet it had not happened as he'd planned. Though he would be expected to address his fellow monks as "brother" or "sister" from now on, Mikulov's true family lay elsewhere. His closest kin rested behind him, at the mountain's summit, not inside this monastery.

THE ORPHAN AND THE JEWELER

GAVIN JURGENS-FYHRIE

CHAPTER I

"Before my first sunset in Zhou, I was insulted; stripped of currency, clothing, and dignity; and left for dead in a puddle. I have since been told I was fortunate to escape so lightly." —Abd al-Hazir, Xiansai Chronicles

Smiling into the rushing wind, Jia leapt from a chimney and fell toward the jagged tiles of the gambling house's roof. Her dagger bumped lightly against her lower back. In ten minutes, she would use it to kill a man. In a second, she would have to deal with the prospect of landing.

None of that mattered right now. She was flying.

Zhou was a ten-mile-long, mismatched jumble of elegant stone temples and shanty taverns, fortified towers and sagging tenements, all crammed into the cradle of the Guozhi mountain range. Since roads were seen as a waste of precious space, it was more a city of hidden, crooked alleys than streets and plazas. Anything could happen to the careless down there, and often did.

Jia rolled as she landed, her padded armor taking the silent brunt of the impact, and was back on her feet and sprinting in half a second. Up here, she could choose her own path. No dead ends or last stands. Just miles of rooftops and freedom in all directions. She could pretend that she had no obligations. That she was free to go anywhere.

Windows flashed by, the sour-faced gamblers within too occupied by their losing hands to notice her. However, Elder Brother Qiu, sitting by the man he was assigned

to kill, did. He raised an irritated eyebrow at her recklessness, and she waved cheerfully. Being spotted by members of the Tenth Family didn't count as a failure of the test. They were *trained* to see things.

Nine Great Families ruled Zhou, each named for the industry it dominated within the city. The Tenth Family had no name other than its number. Its monopoly was crime: theft, smuggling, vice, and murder.

The family had raised Jia since she was an infant. She wasn't the only one. Most strays and foundlings who survived Zhou's deadly streets ended up on the Tenth's metaphorical doorstep sooner or later. The Tenth Family gave these orphans food, a bed, and useful training. And when they turned eighteen, it gave them a choice.

They could leave with a generous bag of gold and choose their future. A great deal of the world was *not* Zhou, and there were many places where a young man or woman with a unique education could find a happy life.

Or, they could join the Tenth Family. And kill.

Jia had chosen the latter but wanted the former. She wanted to leave, to explore the world, but the Tenth was under attack. She couldn't abandon her family.

She sprang off the edge of the gambling house into the nestled stonework of Tong-Shi's temple[1]. It bristled with spirals of statues and intricate friezes, and was as good as a staircase to the right feet.

[1] Tong-Shi is the father god of the Xiansai pantheon. He is believed to be omnipresent but not omniscient; this means that he is generally depicted with a somewhat overwhelmed expression.

She climbed, rising above the squalid patchwork of the city, her boots scuffing across upraised palms and bowed heads, her fingertips trailing over the stone parables showing Xiansai's fifty-nine noble gods seducing, betraying, and fighting one another. Jia paid no attention. The Tenth had little use for the complicated theology of its homeland, with one notable exception.

Jia paused at the frieze depicting *The First Theft.* A statue of the laughing little god Zei ran across the sky, pursued by the wrath of the heavens.

"The trickster Zei crept among the sleeping gods," Elder Sister Rou had told the orphans of the Tenth many years ago. "With clever hands and a wide grin, he stole from his brothers and sisters until his pockets jingled. Then he scampered across the black sky, spilling jewels in his haste to escape. Most of them stayed where they were, becoming stars, but some blazed to the ground, shattering into a million pieces…"

Legend said that Zei was caught and banished from the heavens until he returned every stone. A thousand stories began that day, each more preposterous than the last. Xiansai worshiped fifty-nine gods, but it only loved one: Zei, the grinning trickster who fooled emperors, seduced river goddesses, and traveled the world disguised as a humble jeweler.

The thumbs of countless luck-seeking orphans had rubbed the head of the fleeing god almost smooth. Jia passed hers across his gleaming scalp and ran down a stone gutter into the fog of sweet wood smoke and acrid steam that hung over Zhou like a blanket.

Minutes later, she crouched on the edge of a roof, waiting. Li, thirteenth heir to the great Builder family, staggered out of a tavern below, supported by a prostitute who wouldn't be smiling if she knew what he had done to six of her sisters. Jia reached for her dagger…

… just as six Landholder thugs spilled from the alley. Li shouted, drew his fine dueling sword in a silver blur, and shoved the woman at them to buy time. A Landholder impatiently ran her through and pushed her aside. She crumpled, sightless eyes turning toward the sky.

Jia froze.

One of the Landholders lunged. Li batted the blade away with his own and slapped the would-be assassin, laughing. The thugs charged together, and Li gave ground, his sword darting about to deflect their clumsy slashes. None of them spared another glance for the fallen woman.

Jia realized that she had drawn her dagger. She stared at it. Her trainers had told her she was ruled by her passions. She took a deep breath.

She was here for only one death. Waiting was the best strategy. The Landholders might kill Li for her. Then, they'd go drinking to celebrate, and laugh and dance, *and the woman would still be dead.*

Jia sighed, then sprang into the melee below.

In the lowest level of the Shifting Estate[2], Stepfather Yao laid a cup of steaming tea carefully before Jia.

"Drink," was all he said.

It was a dark liquid in a plain porcelain cup. It was rumored that the tea tasted faintly (and briefly) of cinnamon for those who had failed their test. The rumor was stupid. No one who failed was allowed to leave the Stepfather's office alive.

She exhaled sharply and gulped it down. It tasted like cinnamon.

"That was a foolish thing you did," said Stepfather Yao, folding his hands over his considerable belly. "Seven men are dead. I just asked for one."

Yao was not soft, despite his appearance; Jia had seen him break the back of one of Jagged Liang's watchmen with a single blow. The Stepfather was second only to the leader of the Tenth, the grim and silent Broken Man. She put her hands on the desk between her and Yao so she could glare at them if they trembled.

"That woman," she said, knowing that the observers had told him everything, "I could have saved her before Li butchered her like the others, and the Landholders killed her for no reason."

"One of them did," Stepfather Yao corrected.

"The others didn't punish him. They barely even noticed."

"No," Stepfather Yao said, eyes narrowing. "But they were not your assignment."

[2] The Shifting Estate is the bastion of the Tenth Family and rumored to teleport about the city. In reality, the Tenth uses many "Shifting Estates," but encourages and embellishes the rumors whenever possible.

"I did what I—" she began. Stepfather Yao slapped the desk.

"*They were not* your assignment!"

"I don't care!" Jia shouted. "The Great Families war in the streets like it's a game! The woman worked for us, Stepfather. She was family, and they killed her!"

Stepfather Yao folded his hands.

"And so," he said, all traces of rage gone, "you jumped into the middle of a sword fight with only a dagger, and killed seven men."

"Six," she said. "Li tripped over one of the Landholder corpses and broke his neck."

"Amazing," Yao said. "But careless. There were so many witnesses."

A stone hand closed over Jia's heart. Being seen on her first mission meant failure, regardless of the circumstances. Failure meant the tea she had just drunk was poison.

"But somehow, none of them saw you," Stepfather Yao said, smiling.
"Congratulations, Little Sister."

Jia melted into the chair, dizzy with relief.

"Thank you, Stepfather."

"And if you are ever that reckless again, 'punishment' will be too gentle a term for what will happen to you. You must understand that we are at war with Jagged Liang, and every soldier is needed…"

Jia straightened as Yao spoke of obligations, distracted by… something odd. The Stepfather's office was a small but lavish room, with the desk between them, a cabinet, and a doorway in the left wall, leading to the Stepfather's private chambers. She could have sworn she'd felt a breeze…

She blinked. A bony old man in threadbare robes and battered sandals shuffled out of the doorway, sniffing the air, his wispy beard quivering. He noticed her, nodded gravely, and crossed over to the cabinet, quietly smacking his lips. After selecting an especially fine teacup, he surveyed the room with the gentle confusion of a guest wondering where his host kept the sugar.

Jia glanced between Stepfather Yao and the old man. Was she supposed to ignore him? Rise to greet him? Was this another test? Was she failing it?

Annoyance flashed across Stepfather Yao's face.

"What in the name of all the Hells are you looking at?" he said, turning around. His jaw dropped at the sight of the elderly intruder happily spooning cubes of crystallized burrower venom into a teacup.

"Guards!"

CHAPTER 2

"But even nude as a peeled chicken and tied to a stake atop a bonfire, crafty Zei had more tricks than the ocean has secrets." —Zei and the Tiger's Thirty Tails

Five busy minutes later, Stepfather Yao sat at his desk, frowning at the old man who had somehow breached the most secure level of the most secret fortress in all of Xiansai. Yao had immediately sent news of the intrusion in the usual way to the Broken Man, who was… on business, but that was only a formality. Intruders died.

Aunt Xa and Uncle Hao, two of the Tenth's deadliest assassins, stood on either side of the unwelcome visitor, blades drawn and ready to strike at the Stepfather's word. Apparently ignorant of the implied threat, the old man beamed at the luxurious surroundings and turned his attention to the desk between Yao and himself. He sighed.

"I am *famished*," he said. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"Of course," Yao said, turning to Jia, who waited unhappily by the door. Perhaps she had expected to be sent out of the room. Were she any other little sister, he would have done so. But Jia was different, and always had been. She needed to be harder. He pretended not to notice that Aunt Xa, who'd once bitten out a man's throat, was shooting concerned glances at the girl.

"Bring us a plate of cakes from my larder, Little Sister. Then make some tea from the brown pot."

Jia hurried away and came back with a plate piled high with cakes. The old man's eyes widened as it was set before him.

"All right, my friend," Yao said when Jia had returned to the larder to make the tea. "Who are you, and how did you find your way in here?"

"Through the secret passage behind your bookcase," the old man said, staring at the cakes as if they were telling him secrets. "May I have that chocolate one with the yanberry stripes? It looks marvelous."

Yao frowned.

"I asked your name."

"Yes, I heard you."

"And?"

"I thought you were joking!" The old man laughed, flinging his hands into the air. "Everyone knows Covetous Shen!"

"I, sadly, do not," Stepfather Yao said. "Help yourself to the cakes, my friend." Covetous Shen's jaw dropped at this unexpected generosity, and he lunged at the plate.

"Now, I would like to know why you have…" Stepfather Yao trailed off in amazed horror as Shen demolished the pile of cakes as if it held the antidote to the poisoned tea Jia was making.

"… why you have come here," Yao managed finally. Aunt Xa and Uncle Hao appeared hypnotized by the carnage.

The old man answered in muffled detail, spraying pieces of cake across the desk.

"I don't believe I understood that," Stepfather Yao said.

"I am not surprised," Shen said, swallowing the last bite. "It is a very complex plan."

"No," Yao said, taking a calming breath. "I could not understand what you said through your mouthfuls of cake."

"I apologize. Let me explain again… Oh, here is the tea!"

Porcelain clinked as Jia returned and set the steaming pot and two cups on the desk.

"Thank you, Little Sister," Yao said, and poured Shen a cup. Minute swirls the color of polished oak betrayed the dark tea's deadly contents, but the old man would never taste or feel a thing. He would fall asleep, and that would be it. But there was still the matter of—

Shen seized the cup and downed it in one gulp.

"Oh my," the old man said, breathing out steam. "That was delicious. May I trouble you for some more?"

Brow furrowed, Yao poured another cup. Shen sipped the tea and sloshed it thoughtfully around his mouth.

"Let me ask once more," Stepfather Yao said. "Why are you here?"

Covetous Shen pursed his lips in solemn thought, and he tasted the tea again.

Delight bloomed across his face. He leaned conspiratorially toward Stepfather Yao.

"Is that scorpion root I taste?" he said, as though one of the deadlier poisons known to man were an unexpected hint of almond.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. And if you want to—"

"It's poisonous, you know."

"I know it is," Yao said, gritting his teeth. "And if you want the antidote—" "Oh, there's no antidote," Covetous Shen said, pouring himself some more tea.

"It's one of the deadlier poisons known to man. Luckily, I once spent an unfortunate month trapped on an island packed with scorpion roots and venomous snakes. I had to eat them to survive, of course. The experience left me quite immune to most poisons!"

Stepfather Yao glared at Shen. There was a mystery here. Yao hated mysteries.

He met Uncle Hao's eyes and nodded.

The Great Families sent their magical prodigies to Caldeum's Yshari Sanctum to meditate on the wise use of power so they could return to Xiansai and use it unwisely. The Tenth Family preferred more direct approaches to murder, and trained its own in the use of subtly applied force on internal organs.

Uncle Hao raised his hand, mouthed a word, and closed his fist. The lanterns hanging from the ceiling flickered and swayed as if caught in a dark wind.

In the silence, Covetous Shen noisily slurped his tea. By all appearances, his heart was thoroughly uncrushed.

Beads of sweat dripped from Uncle Hao's forehead. His bloodless fist trembled in the air.

A tremor built. The desk shuddered. Covetous Shen finished his tea with a happy sigh and set the cup down.

The teapot exploded, sending glass shards in every direction.

Growling, and only marginally aware that his assassins were frantically checking themselves for poisoned scratches like frightened children, Stepfather Yao tipped the heavy desk out of the way with one hand, and pulled his knife. Covetous Shen sat, unmoving, brow creased with polite concern. Teeth bared, Yao drew back to strike…

… and paused. His forehead ached, and not from a scratch.

Letters could be intercepted, and messengers could be tortured for information. Through considerable expense and some painful enchantments, Stepfather Yao and the Broken Man had obtained another, more secure method of communicating at a distance.

Yao had carefully pictured the intruder when he had arrived, and had muttered the sending word under his breath. He hadn't expected a response.

A hundred mental whispers coalesced into a single powerful thought from the Broken Man.

Give him whatever he wants, and pray he leaves quickly.

Yao's breath caught in his throat. The Broken Man had taken control of the Tenth during the Purge, when the entire city was turned against the family. He was over six and a half feet of scarred flesh, muscle, and mended bone, and the only man Jagged Liang, the most powerful woman in the city, considered a rival.

Pray he leaves quickly.

The Broken Man was afraid of Covetous Shen.

Stepfather Yao sheathed the knife and looked, truly looked, at the intruder.

Battered, dust-stained robes. Heavy pouches. And that smile…

Everyone in the Tenth had once taken the Orphan's Test and rubbed the head of Zei for luck. Everyone knew the legend of the trickster god, trapped in the mortal realm until he retrieved the jewels he had stolen from the heavens.

Licking lips that were suddenly dry, Yao said, "Who are you, grandfather? Who are you, really?"

"Just a humble jeweler," Covetous Shen said with grand satisfaction. "And I wish to hire young Jia for a most interesting assignment."

CHAPTER 3

"The warrior's wife offered Zei an emperor's ransom in precious jewels, or a night of unbridled debauchery. Of course, for Zei, that was hardly a choice at all." —Zei and the Night of Unbridled Debauchery

The Shifting Estate was five subterranean floors of sleeping quarters and training halls connected by a fortified spiral staircase. Jia followed Covetous Shen up the winding steps sullenly. Somehow, the news of the visitor had already spread. Worried eyes peeked through murder holes, and frantic whispers echoed down in the dark as Xiansai's deadliest assassins jostled for position, trying to see.

Jia growled. She was never going to hear the end of this.

"I know you're not him," she said.

"Not who?" Shen said cheerfully.

"Zei! You're not Zei!"

"I never said I was."

"You never said you weren't!"

"Ah, but if I must spend the entire night telling you everything I am and am not, we won't have time to break into Jagged Liang's tower."

The whispered conversations outside the walls cut off abruptly, and a hundred indrawn breaths sucked the air from the stairwell. Jia stopped dead.

"*What?*" she shrieked.

Shen peered back at her around the curve of the staircase.

"Oh, didn't I say? Yes, we are going to steal secrets from the Tower of the Advisor. Isn't that wonderful?"

Zhou's laws were determined by a ruling council made up of one man or woman from each of the nine Great Families. As none of the Great Families was foolish enough to trust the others or work together with them, they had long ago created the role of advisor.

This powerful and dangerous position was generally held by a successful merchant raised from the teeming masses. He or she brought important matters[3] to the attention of the ruling council and executed its orders[4], giving the Great Families time to hold masquerades and plot the assassinations of loved ones. Advisors worked entirely without oversight and were the de facto rulers of Zhou. They also rarely lived to see the end of their one-year term.

This meant that the current advisor, Jagged Liang, was… unusual. She had used the increasing reports of demonic attacks in the bordering Dreadlands and the rest of the world to remain in power for four years, and had survived sixteen assassination attempts. Before she became advisor, the Great Families had filled the city watch with the dregs of their personal armies; Liang reformed, fired, or outright killed the drunks, spies, and criminals, leaving a well-trained and better-compensated force that answered only to her.

[3] I.e., important to the Great Family that paid the advisor the most.

[4] See above.

In short, Jagged Liang was the sole guardian of order in a city that thrived on chaos. And that put her directly at odds with the Tenth, which prospered from satisfying the whims of the rich and powerful. A silent war had been escalating for years now. Her watchmen raided storehouses and slaughtered Jia's adopted family in the streets. In return, uncles and aunts paid visits to watch houses and made sure the entire city could see the flames.[5]

No one, not even the Builders and the Landholders, hated each other more than the Broken Man and Jagged Liang.

Jia leaned against the wall. *And we're going to steal from her.*

"I'm dead," she said.

"Only if her guards catch us," Covetous Shen said, flapping his hands dismissively. "Or we fall during the climb."

"Climb?" Jia said, holding her forehead.

"Oh yes. We will be ascending the outside of the tower." Shen frowned. "Now that I'm hearing the plan out loud, it does sound quite risky. Luckily, you have a secret weapon."

"Yes? What's that?"

"Me!" Shen said, and he vanished around the curve again. Jia felt her family watching her.

[5] When a contract calls for a subtle assassination, Stepfather Yao sends an elder brother or sister. Aunts and uncles are sent on assignments only when it must be made abundantly clear that certain individuals have *severely* displeased the Tenth Family.

"Be strong, Little Sister," one of them said, reaching through a murder hole to touch her shoulder. "Be silent. Be careful."

"Hide in plain sight," said another.

Jia sighed. The last was a quote. From the *Book of Zei*.

Covetous Shen bounded from the estate's false storefront, and Jia followed glumly. Rugged cobblestone streets reeled through clumps of sagging, multilevel tenements that blocked the stars above.

But not the entire skyline. Half a mile away, the serrated shape of the Tower of the Advisor rose haughtily from the surrounding squalor, waiting for them.

Covetous Shen stood absolutely still in the center of the uneven street. In the soft moonlight, his tangled beard almost glowed, and the faintest memory tickled the back of Jia's mind…

And it was gone. She shook her head and started toward Shen. Maybe the old fraud was having second thoughts.

No. He was hypnotized by the sight of a distant street vendor up the winding curve of the road leading to the tower. The sizzle of meat sent curls of fragrant smoke looping toward them.

"We should head over the roofs."

"There are curried beef vendors on the rooftops?" Shen said with awe. "I have been gone from this city of wonders for too long."

"No," Jia snapped. "It's safer."

"Ah, yes," Shen said, nodding seriously. "Safety is most important. Have no fear. If we need to jump off roofs and battle seven men, I shall let you go first."

He tottered toward the street vendor, leaving Jia gaping in his wake. He must have overheard, of course. But Stepfather Yao hadn't mentioned the roof…

The vendor's cart and grill were built against an open kitchen, connected to its soot-stained walls and ceiling by a complicated array of chains and gears; it looked as though the entire contraption could be pulled back in a hurry so that the slab of iron over the cart would swing down and seal the shop. Jia caught up just as Covetous Shen nudged apologetically through the small line of people waiting their turn. He then ordered everything on the grill.

"Everything, grandfather?" the vendor said, his brow crinkling beneath a wide straw hat with upturned edges. He ignored the grumbling crowd; selling everything at once meant he could go to bed early with a pouch full of gold.

"Absolutely!" Shen said. "My young friend and I have a hard climb ahead of us and—
"

"We were here first, old man," growled a middle-aged woman with tired eyes and a heavy, clucking bag over her shoulder.

"Were you? Impossible!" Shen said. "I would have noticed such a beautiful woman in line before me. But no one should go hungry!

"Vendor!" he shouted, slamming his hand down. "Meat for all my friends!" Jia pushed past the faintly smiling woman and a street performer with a huge eighteen-stringed matar on his back.

"What are you *doing*?" she hissed.

"Preparing for our secret mission," Shen said in a whisper that was probably heard across the street. There was a sizzling sound.

"You're making a scene!"

"Ah. You may be right," Shen said. "I will proceed more subtly."

"Grandfather," the vendor said, his eyes wide. "Your—your hand!"

Shen looked at him. He looked at the hand he'd slammed down… on the red-hot grill.

"No harm done!" the old man said, leaning onto the grill with his other hand. "I am quite resistant to burns, and it is chilly tonight. Now, where is my meat?"

"Money first," the vendor said, wincing at the continued sizzle.

"Oh, of course. My apologies." Shen straightened and sorted through his pouches with both hands, muttering. Finally, he brightened and brandished a ruby. His palms were unburned.

"Will this do?"

Eyes moved from the hands to the ruby, then to Shen's wrinkled face. Someone whispered, "Jeweler," then, "Zei," and this time, even Jia was… uncertain. The jewel. The unblemished skin that should be scorched. The poison. The magic. Who *was* he?

Still, she was young, and her natural cynicism bounced back hard.

"You call this subtle?" she said.

"It's not the largest one I have," Shen said, looking concerned.

"It could buy this street!" Jia said. "And you're spending it on a cart's worth of beef?"

"Can't you smell it? A ruby is hardly a fair bargain for such delicious meat!"

"You're a fool," Jia said.

"Beauty makes fools of the best of men," Shen said, winking at the woman with the sack of chickens. She blushed like a priestess. "But you have a good point.

"Vendor, include that wondrous hat, and this paltry ruby is yours," he said, waving the gem above his head. The vendor's eyes were locked to it.

"Stop flashing it around," Jia said. "Do you want to get killed?"

"By these fine people?" Shen said, handing over the ruby and shoving his new hat onto his head. "They seem trustworthy to me. Besides, who would kill someone over my jewels?"

"Only most of the city," Jia said. "Stop shouting about your damn jewels."

"I am more than happy to share," Shen said, adjusting his hat. "I have plenty." On cue, three scrawny thugs swaggered from a nearby alleyway. Jia moved one foot softly behind her and let a dagger slip silently into her hand, concealed by the nervous crowd. These idiots weren't wearing the mark of the Tenth, which meant

that they were unauthorized freelancers[6] and unlikely to go away because she asked. In fact, they would probably try to kill her. She would just have to kill them f—

A wandering patrol of the advisor's city watch was approaching from the opposite direction. Perfect. And here she was in her inconspicuous assassin's armor.

The vendor could apparently see the future as well. He hauled the cart backward, and the iron roof began to swing closed.

Covetous Shen caught it with one hand and lifted it back up without any sign of effort.

"Is that," he said, "ginger wine I spy on the shelf behind you?" Pulling

desperately on the unyielding handle, the vendor nodded.

"I will pay you an opal for each bottle," Shen said. His voice echoed off the high buildings above.

The vendor froze. The bald thug dropped his cudgel.

"*Really*, an opal for each bottle?" Jia said.

"I haven't drunk nearly enough ginger wine in my life," Shen said solemnly. "It is one of my greatest regrets."

Gambling his life for opals, the vendor passed Shen a bottle. Shen tossed it to the bald thug without looking.

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[6] The Tenth did not have a good sense of humor about competition in Zhou. Freelance thieves, con men, and fences either paid the family a percentage of their earnings, or lost a percentage, usually of something vital.

"Wine for my friends!" the old man declared. "And now that we have an audience, we will need music!"

An audience? Jia looked up. People leaned out of their open windows, trying to see what was going on. This never happened. At night, Zhou was a city of locked doors and closed shutters. You didn't try to find out what all the noise was about unless you wanted it to come upstairs and introduce itself.

"May I borrow your matar, young man?" Shen said to the street performer. "May I have some wine?"

"A fair bargain!" Wine and instrument were exchanged. Shen staggered under the weight of the matar. "These are heavier than I remember. I will need both hands. "You there!" he said to the bald thug. "Help our vendor friend pass the wine around. Everyone else, sing along if you know the words!"

Everyone knew the words, especially since they were dirty ones. Not many songs about Zei were clean. When he got to the part where the peacock queen found Zei in the tree with her three sisters, the woman with the chickens and the bald thug were holding each other and howling laughter.

More and more people spilled into the street only to have bottles shoved at them. The city watch arrived, blowing whistles to summon guards to handle the chaos. Reunited with his matar and blessed with Shen's hat, the street performer strummed maniacally and sang along with his new friends. The vendor shouted for his wife to wake up, then told her to hide the bag of opals and bring more ginger wine and raw meat from the cellar…

Several blocks away and ten minutes later, Jia and Covetous Shen stood at the edge of the courtyard surrounding the Tower of the Advisor. As they watched, the last of the foot patrols left in the direction of the impromptu street festival.

"You cunning old devil," Jia said. "You did all of that on purp—wait, you brought a bottle of wine?"

"I get thirsty on long climbs," Shen said, flicking the cork free with a practiced thumb and draining the bottle halfway in three gulps.

Irritated that a man at least four times her age was forcing her to be the adult in the situation, Jia said, "You can't go up that tower drunk, old man."

"Why not?" Shen said. "I've ascended thousands of towers. Sobriety has never improved the experience."

"You'll fall!"

"Oh no, no. I am too frail to fall. Though I haven't tested the theory, I am certain I would float gently to the ground."

"Fine," Jia said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Let's go. When I give the sign—" Shen was already scampering across the courtyard. She cursed and followed, expecting the cry of a guard at any moment. None came, though there had to be archers on neighboring roofs. Shen's luck appeared to be rubbing off on her.

He reached the tower, tucked the bottle into his vast network of pouches, and scrambled up the first ten feet of sheer wall like a rabid monkey. Jia had to use every trick of leverage and muscle to stay with him.

Zhou fell away beneath them. Darkness ruled the sleeping city, except for the miniature Festival of Zei[7] Shen had created and the radiant clusters of torchlight and lanterns marking the Eternal Market to the east.

Eventually, Jia noticed that Shen was more or less going straight up the wall. Paying attention now, she saw irregular notches cut cleverly into the polished stone, invisible from below.

"Someone else has been climbing this tower," she said.

"Oh yes," Shen said, not even slightly out of breath. "My son comes here quite often."

"Son?" Jia said. "But you keep insinuating you're a—"

"Celibate? Never. Women would flip mountains into the sea before they allowed that."

"No, a god. And *please* don't talk about s—about celibacy," Jia said, blushing. "Why not?"

Shen said innocently, pausing to scratch his bearded chin, one bony hand wedged in a crevice.

"Because you're…"

"Immensely handsome? Pleasantly scented?"

"Old."

[7] Xiansai celebrates many holidays devoted to making a fool of oneself in public, but none of them matches the sheer pants-on-the-head depravity of the annual Festival of Zei, which includes fourteen different citywide parades, astonishingly vulgar reenactments of the god's numerous adventures, and the traditional flood of tricks and practical jokes that almost always result in entire neighborhoods being rendered uninhabitable for weeks.

"That is true," Shen said, nodding regretfully. "I am old. Too old, in fact, to carry this heavy bottle of wine any farther. Catch."

He dropped the bottle, and she barely caught it before it would have plummeted past her to smash against the cobbles far, far below.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Drink it," Shen said. A gust of wind sent his robes rippling as he braced a sandaled foot against a tiny crevice. "Then, you smash the bottle to scare away hangovers!"

"I'm not going to... All right, does that really work?"

"Possibly," Shen said. "Personally, I enjoy hangovers. They remind me of…" He trailed off. The silence was so unexpected that Jia felt driven to fill it. "Remind you of…?"

"Oh, memories," Shen said, grinning down at her.

For the first time, Jia really looked at him. Beneath that oddly familiar beard and the easy smile, she'd seen the briefest glimpse of… sadness, locked behind high walls and a fortified gate. A gate that was closed again.

"You were talking about your son," she said, tucking the bottle into her padded armor.

"Oh, yes. He races up this tower more often than he should. You see, he and Liang are secret lovers."

Jia's hand froze in midair.

"Jagged Liang? The advisor whose tower we're hanging from? That Liang?" "Absolutely," Shen said happily. "They've been in love for many years. Decades,

at least."

"That's impossible," Jia said. Songs had been written of the advisor's lack of interest in romance. Liang had turned down a hundred proposals from various members of the Great Families; it was, Jia thought, one of her only redeeming qualities.

"Not impossible. Just surprising. You may wish to whisper at this point," Shen added. The advisor's window loomed above.

"And this son of yours," Jia said, certain Shen was playing with her. "Is he also a famous seducer of women? A god in disguise?"

"Oh, didn't I say?" Shen said. "You know him as the Broken Man."

Jia slipped. Faster than falling lightning, Shen reached down and caught her wrist with a grunt. Her boots dangled in open space, hundreds of feet in the howling air.

"Careful," was all he said before he swung her toward the wall. She clung to it a moment, face against the cold stone, finding her breath.

"No," she finally managed. "We're at war with Liang's city watch. They hate each other."

"Passion is certainly involved," Shen said, moving again. Either the subject or the near fall had drained the easy humor from his voice.

The window was only five feet above now.

"You're wrong! The Broken Man wouldn't betray us." She heard the desperation in her words, and hated herself for it.

"He was loyal to her first," Shen said kindly. "And the Tenth is a distant third."

"Third? Then what's the second?"

"I am glad you asked!" Shen said brightly. "That is the secret I brought you here to discover."

And with one sinewy arm, he hauled her by the back of her armor to the ledge of the window.

A blade of moonlight pierced the advisor's bedchamber, illuminating a lush carpet, a firepit, and a bed. Jagged Liang faced the wall, drawing a robe over her bare back and pale shoulders.

Naked to the waist, the Broken Man stepped out of the darkness behind her, more scars than skin. Two killer's hands slipped around her throat, pulling her chin up gently, gently, to kiss her…

It was the rooftop all over again. Jia was through the window with her dagger drawn before her brain had time to catch up.

Jagged Liang jerked out of the Broken Man's arms. Her mouth opened…

> … and the Broken Man covered it, holding the advisor back. He stared at Jia, his face unreadable, and she knew that he couldn't let her leave alive. Neither of them could.

She wasn't going to escape the way she had come. Jia lunged over the ledge and held a hand out for Covetous Shen… who wasn't there. The wall down to the

courtyard was completely devoid of any lunatics with delusions of godhood.

Cursing, she spun around just in time to see the Broken Man reaching for her…

She slashed his wrist with her dagger, ducked beneath his arm when he recoiled, and sprinted for the last exit left to her—

"Guards!" Liang roared from behind. Two watchmen burst through the door, her only hope for escape, swords drawn. Without thinking, Jia pulled Shen's bottle from her armor and flung it at the nearest one's head. It rang him like a bell, and he staggered sideways. She darted outside the silver arc of the other guard's slash, plunged her dagger into his forearm, and caught the sword as it fell.

She wheeled about, ignoring the guard's shrieks, and just barely deflected—oh gods—Liang's blade. The woman had killed dozens of the Tenth's assassins. Jia's family. And the Broken Man, its protector, was *in love* with her…

Blood trailing from his wounded wrist, the Broken Man charged across the bedchamber. Liang swung once, twice, and Jia, hissing with rage, moved with the momentum of the strikes, parrying along the edges of the advisor's blades, spinning…

… and, piling her heartsick fury into a single scream, Jia hurled both dagger and sword at the Broken Man's chest.

He slapped them out of the air and kept coming.

She turned and ran from the bedchamber, down the hallway, to a winding staircase. Armored boots rang on the steps below. Up was the only choice.

Up was death, she knew. She was going to die, and her family would go on suffering for the Broken Man's lies…

She reached the moonlit top of the tower. It was oddly calm. It was also, of course, a dead end.

Jia ran to the edge of the roof, panting, just in case someone had been thoughtful enough to install a ladder since her ascent. No. A straight fall all the way to the courtyard far below. She could make it back down to the advisor's window and the handholds, but not in a hurry. And by the shouts, the guards were almost here.

Jia closed her eyes. There was a story. A story about Zei...

Chased by the Lords of Fire, clever Zei climbed to the very top of the sky. And when they mocked him, Zei planted a kiss on the blushing cheek of the dawn, and leapt…

Jia opened her eyes. Steel scraped on stone behind her as the guards advanced. She might never travel to the horizon as she wanted to, but she could fly one more time…

She turned away from the drop, her heel against the edge of oblivion. At least twenty smirking guards held her in a half ring of spears and fine blades. Twenty soldiers who might go on to hurt her family.

She sighed, and charged.

A sword cut at her throat, and she wasn't there. A spear thrust at her back, and she let it pass behind her before grabbing the haft and tearing it out of the guard's hands.

Oak rang on steel as she bashed the spear's handle into helmets, and a guard fell to the roof, screaming, when she plunged the tip neatly through a gap in his legplates, into his thigh. Jia fought on, knowing she was going to lose. They herded her to the yawning edge, and a lucky slash cut her spear in half. One of them grabbed her from behind, and, snarling, she sank the spear into the top of his foot, whirled out of his arms, and buried the point in his chest.

The haft splintered. She snatched the sword out of the guard's hand before he fell from the tower, and leapt into the thick of the men who would be her killers. Each sweep of her blade deflected multiple blows; each strike found flesh. Laughing, she danced and spun and fought on, and on…

When nine guards remained, one knocked her down with a gauntleted fist, and another kicked the sword from her hand.

Dizzy, she watched the moonlit shadow of the axe rising above her head, and heard someone… someone running up the stairs…

The Broken Man exploded out of the stairwell, seized two guards by the neck, and threw them off the tower. He wheeled around and caught a spear behind his head just as the tip brushed his skin. His backhand crushed the spearman's helmet.

Jia dove for her sword, retrieving it in time to parry a thrust at her chest. His torn knuckles dripping, the Broken Man rose up behind the unlucky guard, took his head in two massive hands, and squeezed.

The remaining five guards backed away, knowing the Broken Man by sight. But Jia knew he wouldn't spare them. Like her, they were witnesses…

… but Jia realized, frowning, that the Broken Man could have let her die.

The man that frail old Covetous Shen had called his son killed three more men in a handful of seconds. The last two he bashed together until they stopped moving, and he tossed them down the stairs.

He turned, blood running from a dozen wounds.

"She's your mother," he said.

Jia stared blankly at him. Shen's secret. Liang and the Broken Man had been in love for decades…

"And you're…"

"Yes."

He hadn't been trying to hurt her. He'd been trying to stop Liang, who didn't recognize her.

She had his eyes, Jia noticed; this was the first time she could remember him ever looking at her.

"I knew he'd bring you here," he said. "No matter the cost."

If this were one of the stories she'd heard as a child, she would have thrown her arms around him. Instead she slapped him, and would have given anything to take it back.

"I'm sorry," the dark-eyed giant said. "I am a target. I couldn't make you one."

Silk brushed stone to her left. Jagged Liang was watching her from the shadows of the stairwell. Now that Jia was aware of what to look for, there was no denying that she and the advisor were nearly identical.

Setting her jaw, Jagged Liang turned without a word and walked back down the stairs.

"She hasn't seen you since you were born," the Broken Man said. "She wouldn't have sent the guards after you if she'd known it was you."

"I'm not sure I believe that," Jia said, remembering the cold fury in her mother's eyes.

"You don't know her," her father said, but the huge man sounded unsure.

"And you do," Jia said flatly.

"Since we were children fighting for food on the streets," he said. "But when I joined the Tenth and made it my family, she set off alone."

Jia felt unwelcome admiration stir in her heart. Her mother, through sheer cunning and will, had worked up from the streets, making the right connections, becoming the advisor, surviving…

... to turn into Jagged Liang, who hunted the assassin children of her lover. Jia could not forgive her, even if she asked.

"We should talk to her," the Broken Man said. "Now that she's seen you…"

Jia checked a sigh as understanding dawned. *He's loyal to Liang first, me second, the Tenth third, but he wants to keep all of us…*

"We will never be a family," she said. "Understand? She won't stop just because you love her. This ends with her death or the streets red with our blood, *and you know it*."

"She's your mother," he said.

"No," Jia said, dropping to her haunches at the edge of the roof. "She's your lover. I'm an orphan."

And she climbed down, leaving him standing alone on the tower, surrounded by the dead.

CHAPTER 4

"Shadows disappear in daylight. Holes can be searched. Hide in plain sight, and you will never be found." —Book of Zei

Hours later, Jia sat high atop Tong-Shi's temple again, with her back to Zei's frieze and her feet dangling in open air. Dawn was close. The Council Stronghold glittered with lantern light like a necklace at the throat of the dark Guozhi Mountains. The chimneys of the Buried Forge burned a deep crimson.

She wanted to leave. The Tenth was her family, but her brothers and sisters were—mostly—not children. They enjoyed this life, this constant battle. And she, when it came down to it, did not.

Jia knew she would die fighting a senseless war for the love of her family and the foolish loyalty she still felt for her father. She wanted to leave, but duty would keep her here.

"Hello, Granddaughter," Covetous Shen said, plopping down on the ledge beside her.

"Why did you do it?" Jia said.

"A child should know who her parents are," Shen said, swinging his feet in space. "How else can she know what not to become?"

"More jokes," Jia said, turning away.

"Am I joking?" Shen said sharply. "Your mother wants to rule this city unopposed, and takes steps to eradicate all of the Great Families. Your father knows

that she will not stop at nine. Soon, their doomed love will not be enough, and this country will endure yet another civil war. Be wiser than they, Granddaughter."

Jia stared. The easy smiles were gone. In their place was more sorrow than a hundred lifetimes could bear.

"Should I also know who my grandfather is?" she said finally. Shen turned to consider the frieze of laughing Zei fleeing the wrath of the gods. In profile, both faces were exactly the same.

"What a handsome young man," Covetous Shen said, smiling slightly.

"What should I do?" Jia said after a moment's silence told her that Shen wasn't going to say anything else. "Try to make peace between my mother and father? Run and hide?"

"Do whatever you want," he said, brushing her cheek. "Life can be so very short."

"For mortals, you mean."

Shen said nothing at first.

"Look at all of this." He swept a hand across Zhou. "Once, it was grassland spotted with small tribes. There were flowers.

"Then the world changed. People told stories and watched the skies for directions from beings more powerful than themselves. The stories became laws and obligations, and the tribes grew and fought each other. They believed that they had no choice. And they waited for omens."

He casually pointed at the sky. A burning comet, a molten ball of twisting fire and trailing ash, exploded through the heavens. Cold with awe, Jia turned to Covetous Shen.

"That wasn't me," he said, eyes wide.

She laughed.

"Listen to me," he said, watching the star pass over their heads, falling southwest toward the distant lands beyond the island of Xiansai. "You have your father's heart and your mother's rage. I knew it from the moment I saw him carrying you home for the first time. I asked to hold you, of course. You pulled my beard most fiercely."

At last, Jia remembered: her tiny fingers tangled in his wispy beard ablaze with moonlight. She should have been too young to recall that night, but the memory was hers all the same.

"Now," Shen said, "you are a child of the Tenth Family, and my granddaughter. But you are not bound by our decisions, and not a soldier in our battles."

He took her chin gently and looked at her.

"No matter what anyone tells you, you are free," he said.

In the light of the falling star, Shen seemed immensely tired, incredibly old. She knew without asking that he would follow it. It meant something to him.

It meant nothing to her.

For a long time, they sat in companionable silence. Then Shen sniffed.

"Is that salted pepperfish?" he demanded, standing.

Jia raised her eyebrows.

"You'd better go see," she said. "They might run out."

"You are right," Shen said, nodding urgently. "Hold this for me. I am certain we will find each other again."

He dropped one of his innumerable pouches in her lap, pressed his lips to the crown of her head, and skidded down the temple's gutters in pursuit of the incredible smell.

Jia looked inside the bulging purse. On top of a number of flawless diamonds was a cracked and blackened gem. It was, Jia realized, a type of protective jewel, one meant to deflect magical attacks. Like the kind Uncle Hao had leveled at Shen earlier in the evening.

She waited until dawn burned on the horizon, and she rose, stretching her legs and tucking the pouch into her armor. She could return to the Shifting Estate for breakfast. She could apologize to her father. Or she could find passage on a ship and see lands she'd only read about.

She could go anywhere.

THE TURN OF A CARD

ROBERT ARJET

Nerissa Natoli trudged through the rain-slick streets of Westmarch, the drizzle making the lights glow eerily in the evening's deepening gloom. Her apprehension was less about the creatures sighted of late in the city than about the unseasonably cold weather, the fog that thickened into rain just long enough to make the streets slippery and treacherous. Her rich wool cloak kept her warm, but the indignity of walking through the rain filled her with bitter resentment.

Just a year ago, she would have ridden in the carriage, attended by servants. Of course, a year ago, the creditors had not yet begun arriving at her doorstep with debts and unpaid bills, all in her husband's name. Ashton was a good man, deep down, she told herself. But gambling and drinking had laid many greater men low, and now he had vanished to fate only knew where, taking the last of the family's treasure with him. She could not find it within herself to hold his weakness against him, but when she stepped in an icy puddle, the sour pit in her stomach churned.

She headed down a residential street lined with ancient trees and elegant manor houses, and thought of the many costumed revels she had taken Elizabeth to on this very avenue—back when there was still money for new gowns. The street had seemed stately then, viewed from the window of a carriage. But the carriage had gone soon after the gowns, and now the trees looked black and malevolent, their old limbs writhing through the mist.

She had kept the horses as long as she could. They were a conspicuous sign of her family's station, and when she sold them, she could no longer make even a pretense of propriety. Walking through the wet streets like a commoner, she silently cursed her

fate and wished once again that Ashton would return, his wealth intact, his weakness conquered. She was not one for indulging in fantasy, but she had little else to comfort her. She would find a way, she told herself. She would not have her sister die an impoverished spinster. The thought was enough to steel her resolve. Come what might, no matter the price, she would find a way.

Turning onto a side street, she saw her destination looming before her like a bleak and rocky cliff. It was, in fact, merely the comparatively modest house of one Vincent Dastin, a prosperous—if vulgar—merchant and moneylender, but in her imagination it towered above her, obdurate and forbidding. She eyed the front door with apprehension. A year ago, she would have sent a footman with her message while she sipped a fine Kehjistani wine in the carriage. Tonight, however, she walked the long steps to the door, dreading the shame of asking—no, begging—for the man's patience.

Nerissa reached the entrance and raised her hand to the knocker. She gripped the cold metal with as much resolve as she could muster, and let it fall against the oaken door, which swung open almost immediately on well-oiled hinges.

"Yes?" asked the plump footman who answered. Nerissa thought his cocked eyebrow a little insolent, but she checked her ire—she was, after all, here to beg for her house, and she suspected that her desperation was evident even to the servants. When she'd learned that Ashton had borrowed money against the family manor, she'd felt that her world had turned upside down. Nerissa had never before known what it meant to be in debt to another, never understood the sickening insecurity of bills that could not be paid, obligations that could not be met. But the house—the house was something altogether different. To lose the house would be to lose their refuge, their

last hope of returning to Westmarch society. Her last hope of one day pulling herself out of the pit that Ashton had dug. Her last hope of ever finding a match for Elizabeth.

Summoning her dignity, she politely but firmly informed the man, "I would speak with Master Dastin." Almost as an afterthought, she remembered that she had not been preceded by an introduction, and added, "I am Nerissa Natoli."

The footman paused just an instant longer than Nerissa thought acceptable and then, to her shock, said quickly, "I shall see if the master is in," and closed the door.

This was really too much. To be left standing on the doorstep like a peddler or a common tradesman was an insult that Nerissa did not know how to bear. She resolved to have words with Dastin about the rudeness of his servants.

In the meantime, she thought back to how she had set out that evening, how Elizabeth had pleaded with her to stay and play at cards, and she smiled ruefully. That girl could be in a burning house and would only have a mind for dancing and gaiety. But in a manner of speaking, the House Natoli was indeed burning around her, and Elizabeth would suffer most of all: she was young and beautiful but absolutely without hope of a marriage unless her dowry could somehow be restored. Nerissa forced herself not to imagine the brothels and gambling dens in which her sister's birthright had been lost, but she could feel herself harden inside. Ashton was a good man, deep down, she reminded herself.

The door swung open again, and as Nerissa prepared to enter, the footman intoned with what could not be mistaken for deference, "The master is not receiving."

Nerissa paused, her foot poised to step over the threshold. Had she heard right? Was this upstart merchant refusing her an audience? Her blood rose to her cheeks, and she knew she must control herself. Making a scene now would only add to her humiliation. Her mother had often said that a gentlewoman could be told by the way she bore a slight, and Nerissa was not going to give this insolent servant—or his ill-mannered master—the satisfaction of behaving in anything but the most gracious of ways. She composed herself, said simply, "Very well," and turned gracefully on her heel.

The cobblestone streets were awash as Nerissa walked homeward, the rain falling in earnest now, the reflections of candlelight and lanterns dancing erratically in the puddles that she tried to avoid. As her anger began to wane, fear and desperation grew in its place. In the shock of the slight from Dastin, she had lost sight of what the affront meant. She had been denied even the chance to discuss a further delay on the debt. A chance to beg for her and Elizabeth's home. As dire as her situation had been on the way there, she realized now it was far more desperate.

Lost in her thoughts, she was startled by a sudden whinny. She looked up, the cold rain pelting her face, and realized she did not recognize the street she was on. Narrow, dark, and twisted, it felt like a damp forest, with unseen creatures lurking just out of sight. Nerissa knew the best avenues and boulevards of Westmarch quite well, but this crooked alleyway was menacing in its unfamiliarity.

She turned, trying to find the source of the noise, and heard it again, along with the rattle of carriage wheels. Cursing the fog, Nerissa looked about her, not sure if she was more unnerved by the unseen carriage or the dingy street. With a jolt, a coal-black horse reared before her, the reins jerked sharply back. Nerissa nearly fell to her knees, but suddenly the beast was calm, and the handler gazed down on her as if nothing had happened.

She wasn't familiar with the handler's livery, but the cut of it was out of fashion by a generation at least. She ducked her head again, the shame of her position burning all the hotter in the face of old, respected gentility, but she turned abruptly when she heard her name.

"Nerissa?"

The voice was elderly, soft, and gentle, but completely unfamiliar. Nerissa approached the carriage's open window, the wooden panel drawn back by a delicate, arthritic hand, and she tried to make out a face in the gloom.

"Yes?"

"Don't just stand there, my dear girl. Get out of the rain. You must be soaked. Nathaniel, open the door."

The handler leapt down with deferential grace, and the door swung silently open to her. Nerissa thanked him with a superior nod and stepped into the carriage, too puzzled to feel her shame, and frankly quite thankful to be out of the rain.

As she eased herself onto the wooden bench, her eyes began to adjust to the gloom, and she made out a plump, wrinkled face, an abundance of white curls, and a body shrunk by age to almost child-size. She racked her brain for the woman's name, but could produce nothing. Not the slightest glimmer of recognition for this woman who obviously knew her and who, unlike increasingly significant portions of Westmarch society, was willing to extend a hand of kindness to her.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she finally stammered as the woman gazed upon her with benevolence, "but you seem to have me at a disadvantage. I cannot for the life of me remember where we've met."

The woman smiled indulgently and patted Nerissa's chilled arm with a hand that felt like dried parchment. "Not to worry, dear. We haven't met, so I'm not surprised you don't remember it." She smiled more broadly as Nerissa's bafflement spread across her face, and continued. "I'm a very old friend of your family, and I've been keeping a bit of an eye on you."

Did she wink? Nerissa couldn't be sure. But her breath caught in her chest as she suddenly imagined the woman to be a long-lost dowager aunt with a small fortune to lavish on Nerissa and Elizabeth. She was instantly appalled at such a thought, but with disaster looming so near, anyone who looked remotely like a savior was someone to be handled with the utmost care.

"Keeping an eye on me? Then—then you know…" Nerissa trailed off with a tactful wave of her hand, indicating her family's spiral toward penury, best left unspoken in polite company. The old woman gave the barest of nods.

"Yes, dear. I'm afraid I do. And as odd as it may seem…" Here, she gazed out the window at the driving rain and paused before she finished with an oddly disconcerting fixity in her eyes. "I may have a solution to your, shall we say, situation."

Nerissa struggled to keep her face a polite blank, but her heart leapt in anticipation. She was still baffled by the old woman's identity, but now the prospect of her being a savior was both real and immediate. She chose her words carefully.

"A solution?"

"A *possible* solution, dear. That is, well… Do you play cards?"

Nerissa thought this a rather inopportune non sequitur, but nodded in the affirmative. In fact, she was well known across Westmarch as one of the sharpest hands in the city. She had never succumbed to the gambling fever as Ashton had, but she had emptied the purses of more than one social rival in a "friendly" game of Destiny or Wild Geese. Did the old woman know that? Was she challenging her to a game? Nerissa hardly knew what to think. Ashton had wagered against the family property and lost; could she win it back in the same way? She felt almost giddy with the possibility, but merely smiled and said, "Yes. Yes, I do play cards."

Stepping from the carriage at her own gate, Nerissa noted thankfully that the rain had ceased. In fact, the clouds had scudded from the sky, and thousands of stars shone down upon the night-clad city. She turned back suddenly, catching the door before it closed.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, but I still don't know your name."

"Oh, how foolish of me. I never did tell you. My name is Carlotta."

"Very well, then, Carlotta. I shall expect you tomorrow evening. Are you certain you won't dine with us before we play?"

"Very certain, my child. I prefer to dine alone." And with that, she closed the door, slid the wooden panel shut, and the carriage lurched away into the street.

Her head spinning, Nerissa climbed the steps to her front door. The old woman was probably sitting upon a small fortune and just looking for an excuse to share it with Nerissa and Elizabeth. Of course, the game was just a polite fiction, a social nicety to avoid the appearance of charity. Or perhaps Carlotta was in earnest, and was more interested in a high-stakes game of cards than in Nerissa's well-being. *So be it, then.* She had certainly heard of—and seen—more eccentric behavior among the old and wealthy of Westmarch. If Carlotta wanted a game, Nerissa was more than willing to provide it.

The next evening, as the gloom of twilight gathered about the house, Nerissa hovered anxiously in her private chamber. What if Carlotta was as daft as she seemed, and completely forgot about the appointment? What if it was all a cruel joke of some sort? What if…?

Nerissa stiffened her spine and forced her nerves into submission. She looked around the room: the best of the remaining furniture, a pair of polished oil lamps

burning brightly, a cart with nearly the last bottle of Kehjistani wine and two cups, and of course, on the dark, gleaming table, a deck of cards.

Nerissa had chosen these cards purposefully, adorned as they were with the Natoli family crest. She liked to feel that if she was playing for the future of the House Natoli, then she could at least choose cards that represented the stakes.

And, yes—the stakes. Nerissa looked again at the velvet-covered box that she had laid beside the cards. Within it was every last piece of jewelry she could muster, a fortune to a commoner on the street, but a small stake with which to attempt the redemption of her family's riches. Nerissa knew that she would have to win, and win repeatedly, to put the family on an even footing once again. But she could not afford to win so quickly that she scared the darling old crone off. No, this would require finesse, delicacy, and care.

"Nerissa! Look!"

Her thoughts were shattered and she jumped with a nervous start as her beaming sister bounded into the room. Elizabeth was covered head to foot in what appeared to be great flapping leaves of crimson, umber, and orange. Nerissa recoiled from the sight, but managed a slight smile to match the joy that lit Elizabeth's round, glowing face. Though she couldn't help occasionally resenting Elizabeth's seeming obliviousness to their growing plight, Nerissa also couldn't help being entranced by her sister's beauty and sheer vivacity. She would be perfect for any number of Westmarch gentlemen, and at least a few of the lesser nobility, if she only had a sufficient dowry. But the dowry went to pay Ashton's debts, and now Elizabeth faced a long and lonely life, or worse—a match to some ambitious commoner who would buy

his way into the Natoli family name. Nerissa shuddered at the thought and tried to keep the smile on her face as Elizabeth leapt around the room in some sort of cavorting dance.

"Do you see? Do you see what I am?"

Nerissa restrained herself from the acid-tongued replies that came to mind, and settled on an indifferent, "I don't know… A court jester?"

Elizabeth seemingly stopped mid-leap to gaze in pure bafflement at her sister. "A jester? Do you take me for a fool, Sister?" She tried to look severe but broke into a smile and giggled an appealing arpeggio of laughter, twirling around Nerissa, nearly knocking her off balance. "The Lancasters' revel is in two weeks, and for once I can finally go again."

She gripped Nerissa by the shoulders with the earnest joy of a child, hoping to make her dull, unimaginative older sister understand. "You say I can't go because we can't afford new gowns. But Madam Lancaster says this time we must all make our own costumes! So I shall go!"

She leapt away and struck a pose. Nerissa steadied herself and checked to make sure the arrangement of cards and wine had not been disturbed.

"The theme of the revel is 'Time,'" Elizabeth intoned in mock seriousness. "Now can you guess what I am?"

Nerissa brought her attention back to the girl and looked her over. Upon closer inspection, she could see that Elizabeth was half-covered in scraps of parchment and

cloth pinned carefully to an old brown gown. She did want to humor her sister, but now was not the time for guessing games. "A tree?"

Elizabeth dropped her pose with a sigh of exasperation and shook her curls at Nerissa. "No, you great pudding. I am autumn. Can't you tell by the leaves?" For a second, Nerissa saw the hint of genuine concern in her sister's large brown eyes, the faint uncertainty of a girl who was, after all, wearing last season's gown hastily adorned with cast-off pieces of parchment and gauze. Nerissa's heart melted, and she threw her arms around Elizabeth.

"Of course I can. You are the very picture of autumn. You shall be the talk of the evening."

"I shall!" Elizabeth spun out of Nerissa's arms with an imperious gesture, then giggled. "Oh, thank you, Nerissa. Now I really must get back to cutting out leaves. Maurice is helping me, but they do take ever so long to make."

And just like that, she was gone, flitting out of the chamber like a spirit. Nerissa sighed and found that she was no longer tense or anxious. She picked up the deck of cards and began to shuffle idly. As much as Nerissa cared about the house, Elizabeth was the great weight that lay on her heart. Recovering enough of their fortune to marry her sister well would ease her mind more than anything else, and lift the shame that daily visited her over Elizabeth's diminished prospects. *A good marriage for Elizabeth*, she thought, and she ground her teeth with impatience. It was hers for the taking, and she intended to take it tonight.

"Oh, no, my dear. I'm afraid I no longer take spirits at all." Carlotta waved away the offered cup of wine with her tiny hand, and Nerissa returned it to the table, a little disappointed. Sometimes alcohol provided a slight edge, but Nerissa hadn't counted on it. She had her wits about her; she was alert, ready, almost eager for the game to begin.

"At my age, you know, well… certain things simply must be given up." Carlotta grinned knowingly, and Nerissa politely chuckled in response, although she really had no idea how old this strange woman was. Merely that she had passed "ancient" some time ago, but had not yet arrived at "dead."

"So." Nerissa smiled. "What shall we play? First Light? Destiny? Wild Geese, perhaps?" Nerissa secretly hoped for Wild Geese, as she was particularly adept at the rapid bidding and counter-bidding of the Kehjistani game. But she was prepared to play any of them, or for that matter, any game her guest might suggest.

"Oh no. Wild Geese is far too fast paced for me. I prefer something simpler. Very simple." She nodded her head as if in agreement with herself, and Nerissa waited to hear the game. She began to feel the tension rise again and took a sip of wine.

"But first," Carlotta rasped, her hands gripping the head of an ebony cane that seemed far more than necessary to support such a frail body, "the stakes. We must discuss"—and here, she appeared to harden slightly, to contract in upon herself in some unnatural way—"the stakes."

Nerissa finished the cup of wine and fumbled it back to the table. She picked up the velvet box, displaying it proudly, and opened the top. The contents glittered. "I

have my jewelry," she replied with as much dignity as she could muster, "and some of these pieces have been in my family for generations. This one, for example"—and she lifted out a filigree comb of spun gold with a single large sapphire—"was given to my grandmother on her wedding day. Or this," she said as she carefully withdrew a stiletto, the sheath dotted with three rubies, "was kept by my great-uncle when he was at court. It's really just a showpiece, but he fancied himself quite the soldier." She laughed self-deprecatingly but found herself in an unsettlingly steely gaze from Carlotta. She returned the knife to the box and waited for the old woman to speak.

"No," the crone breathed, her eyes never leaving Nerissa's. "No, I think we should play for more… significant stakes." She waved away Nerissa's stammering objection with a tiny movement of one hand. "I think we should play for the most significant stakes of all. What, my dear, would you want more than anything else in this world?"

Nerissa hesitated, unsure if the old woman was mad, jesting, or something else entirely. Was this her way of offering to pay off the family debts altogether? Nerissa's head swam with the possibilities.

"Before you answer, mind that you be careful what you ask for. The things we want often have a way of turning themselves against us." Carlotta smiled, and Nerissa realized with a flash that this was a test. Of course. The old woman wasn't just offering to take care of the debt; she was testing Nerissa to see what she would say. She crafted her answer meticulously, as if it were the heartfelt longing of a loyal wife and not a calculated economic decision.

"I would see my dear husband, Ashton, return. Sober, reformed, and with all his wealth." She tried to make the last sound like an afterthought instead of her most desperate desire.

"Very well, dear. And in return? What is your most valuable possession? What has always been at your inmost core and is yours alone to give away?"

Nerissa, who fancied herself rather quick at riddles, almost burst out with, "My heart," as the obvious answer. But the thought of this decrepit old thing claiming her heart nearly made her laugh out loud.

Instead, she considered the odd gleam in Carlotta's eye and hesitated again. What would be the best answer? It came to her, and she favored Carlotta with an ingratiating smile of indulgence, as one might give a child who was asking for a treat before dinner.

"I would have you choose, of course. Against my deepest desire, I wager anything of mine which you would have."

"Done," Carlotta shot back, almost before Nerissa finished. The sharpness of her agreement startled Nerissa, and the hardness in her eye seemed to deepen to a metallic spark for just an instant. Or did it? Nerissa caught herself and poured another cup of wine. This old woman was playing tricks with her mind. Or, more likely, sheer stress and anxiety, coupled with the breathtaking prospect of paying off the family's debts, were simply agitating her nerves. She looked closely at Carlotta and saw nothing but doughy-soft cheeks and the deeply etched lines of a plump face accustomed to smiles and laughter. Nerissa chided herself for thinking evil of the

woman. A little off-kilter she might be, but this was her soon-to-be savior, a harmless elderly eccentric, and if she wanted to play for imaginary stakes before bestowing her fortune on Nerissa and Elizabeth, so it would be. She would sing nursery rhymes and play pat-a-cake if that was what the old fool desired. So long as there were gold and silver at the end of it.

"Very well, then." Carlotta reached out for the cards, deftly cutting them with one hand. "It shall be a simple game. I shall draw a card, and then you shall draw a card. We shall continue until each has three. Then we shall reveal our cards one at a time." She nodded to Nerissa as if questioning whether she was following. "By the end, whoever holds the highest card wins."

What was this? Nerissa was more certain than ever of the old woman's dotage. This was no game of skill; this was mere luck. Was she to gamble her family's remaining fortune on the turn of a card? Everything about Carlotta had suggested that she was looking for an invigorating game, but this was no more than a foolish bet on random chance. Still—she was the one with the fortune to dispense or withhold, and Nerissa was going to do everything in her power to humor her.

"High card wins. Certainly." She gestured for Carlotta to draw a card. The old woman nodded her head gently, the snow-white curls bobbing slightly, and reached forward to take a card. Nerissa followed suit, and soon each had three cards face down on the table before them. Without a word, Carlotta turned over her first card.

"Oh, drat," she muttered, and giggled like a child. The card was the three of crowns, not likely to win the game. She stared at Nerissa with eager eyes, her hands bunched in her lap. A little unnerved by her ardor, Nerissa turned over her first card,

anxious to get the game over with so that they might get down to the real business at hand, and revealed the twelve of serpents. Not a bad card at all.

Carlotta whipped over her next card, the seven of serpents, and looked up at Nerissa again with those burning, eager eyes. Nerissa hesitated; there was no thinking to be done, no strategy, but still, she did not like the idea of blindly flipping cards until the game was over. She deliberated between her two remaining cards and finally turned over the eight of lions.

She relaxed slightly. This was foolish. A foolish game, foolish stakes, and a foolish old woman, but the real game—the real stakes—could not be more serious. Nerissa considered how to make her next move after the game was over. She had always been skilled at reading the faces and judging the behavior of her opponents, and she scrutinized Carlotta now as the old woman's hand hovered over her last card.

Nerissa gasped involuntarily when she saw the empress of crowns. That would be hard to beat. Carlotta looked up from the card, a gleam that bordered on the predatory in her eye. Nerissa drew back, then composed herself. What madness was this? Here sat a darling old woman, poised to bestow a fortune on her family, and here Nerissa was, treating this game of imaginary stakes as if it mattered. She laughed, and smiled at her benefactor. "Well, you certainly have the advantage now, my dear. Let's see what I can come up with…"

When Nerissa saw the empress of stars, she felt a palpable wave of relief wash over her. Carlotta merely clucked her tongue and immediately gathered herself together and rose. Nerissa didn't even have time to suggest a second hand before the

woman had excused herself and left the chamber. Nerissa chased after her, half-frantic that she had somehow offended her or missed her chance.

"Well played, my dear. I shall show myself out." Carlotta didn't even look back over her shoulder, and Nerissa tried to keep the pleading tone out of her voice but failed.

"One more hand, surely? You almost had me there. Perhaps a cup of Kehjistani white? Or a—"

"I told you already, dear. I don't take spirits. But I shall call upon you tomorrow night, if you choose."

"Oh yes, certainly. Most certainly. I shall—"

"I said, 'if you choose,' my dear. So consider your choice carefully before tomorrow evening." And with that, she was out the door. Nerissa shook her head. This quarry was going to take more cajoling than she had thought if she was to be persuaded to help the family. The woman seemed an open book, but Nerissa expected there was much yet to learn.

Standing on the front steps, watching the carriage depart, Nerissa realized how cold it had suddenly become. A bitter, damp chill seemed to cut through her, although the evening had been temperate not an hour ago. And that fog again—it appeared to well up from the ground like a living thing, drawing itself together for some malevolent purpose.

She turned back eagerly to the warmth and light of the house—and perhaps a cup of wine—when her thoughts were interrupted by a heavy, grunting shuffle, quite different from the soft creaking of Carlotta's carriage receding into the distance. Nerissa strained her eyes to make out details among the shifting and swirling tendrils of fog.

She cocked her head in annoyance as a large cart slowly coalesced out of the mist and lumbered its way into the courtyard, a driver hunched over like a troglodyte in the seat. What tradesman would be making a delivery at this time of night? And calling at the front door, no less. Did he think that because she had fallen on hard times, simple rules of propriety could be dispensed with?

"Madam Natoli, if it please you?" The heavyset commoner climbed down from the cart, pulling a folded parchment from his belt.

"Yes, I am Madam Natoli. What exactly are you bringing to my house at this hour?"

"Well, I'm afraid it's your husband, ma'am."

Nerissa felt her knees buckle as she made out the rude wooden casket in the back of the cart. Maurice rushed to her side, and she leaned upon him, her breath suddenly caught in her throat.

"Ashton? Is… dead?"

The man looked up at her, concern and pity on his hardy face. "Oh, by the fates, you didn't know? I'm awful sorry, then, ma'am. I wouldn'ta wanted to let you know like this. T'ain't right, it isn't."

He handed the parchment to Nerissa, who took it in numbed fingers. She searched for something to say, anything to break the breathless agony in her chest. "What— what of his possessions? Where are they?"

He scuffed his boots on the steps and shook his head. "Well, then, he's got everything he owns with him, doesn't he? 'All his wealth, a burial shroud,' as the saying goes."

Nerissa felt the color drain from her face, and the man looked about anxiously. "I'll just bring him around back, then, shall I?" He turned to climb into his seat. Nerissa nodded her silent assent and watched the cart wheel out of the courtyard toward the back of the manor. She realized she was still holding the parchment. She unfolded it and tried to make it out through the tears stinging her eyes.

The crabbed writing was difficult to read, but Nerissa could tell well enough what it was: a delivery bill.

Elizabeth, for once in her life, was inconsolable. Perhaps some sense of the depths of their misfortune had finally come home to her with the news of her brother-in-law's death. She had been a favorite of Ashton's, who recognized a kindred spirit in her gaiety and childlike embrace of life. Now, she sobbed so relentlessly that Nerissa was forced to rise from the morass of her own grief and tend to her. She brushed away the tears and thought of what might cheer Elizabeth. "Don't forget the Lancasters' revel, my sweet. You must still finish your costume. Why don't you find Maurice and have him help you cut some more leaves?"

Elizabeth had nodded and trotted off, leaving Nerissa to her brooding thoughts. She knew too much of demons and witchcraft to write this all off as a mere coincidence, but she was at a loss to explain it in any way that made sense. She felt a fool for imagining such things, but then, such things had certainly been reported in Westmarch recently. For an instant, panic rose deep inside her—this witch, this crone, had killed her husband. And now she was bringing poor Elizabeth into the bargain. What wretched fate could she—?

She shook her head fiercely. What mattered was that the old woman would be returning tonight, and Nerissa needed to have her wits about her if she was to arrive upon the fortune she knew could be hers.

"Madam? Madam? A guest…" Maurice was clearly unprepared for Carlotta to simply stride through the door when he opened it, and he trailed after her like a confused puppy, wringing his hands and calling out in the loudest voice he could bring himself to muster when addressing his mistress.

Nerissa roused herself from the bench where she had been contemplating Carlotta's arrival, and strode out to the balustrade overlooking the entryway and the grand staircase. Maurice still followed Carlotta, who mounted the stairs with far more vigor than her tiny frame suggested, her ebony walking stick striking sharply on each marble step. "Show her up, please, Maurice," Nerissa replied reassuringly, knowing with certainty that Carlotta needed no showing. In fact, the old footman would be doing well to catch up with her by the time she reached the chamber. But that was the type of polite fiction upon which gentle society was built.

After the briefest of pleasantries, Carlotta gripped the head of her walking stick in both hands and leaned forward in her chair. "And so, my child. The stakes..."

She let the word trail off like an indecorous proposal, and Nerissa steeled herself. She had given great thought to tonight's stakes. She stiffened her spine, laid her hands carefully in her lap, and spoke slowly and precisely, like a prudent schoolchild reciting a lesson. "Again, I wager anything of mine which you would have."

"That which has always been at your inmost core and is yours alone to give away?"

Nerissa simply nodded her assent. "For my part, I wish a dowry for Elizabeth. One sufficient that any gentleman in Westmarch might marry her."

"Done."

Nerissa was taken aback by the sharpness of Carlotta's voice. And that gleam in her eyes… Was "hungry" the right word? No, but it did seem that the old woman's rosy-cheeked vigor had declined into something more like a crabbed determination. It did not suit her well, and Nerissa found herself disturbed by the extent to which Carlotta's demeanor had changed.

Carlotta silently reached out and, with one hand, cut the cards with an efficient grace. She glanced up at Nerissa, and the bright, almost feverish light shining in her eyes—nestled so incongruously in that wrinkled, doughy face—brought a surge of panic to Nerissa's chest. She looked away and bit down hard on her tongue to distract herself. Carlotta drew a card from the top of the deck.

Nerissa took her card and placed it before her. Carlotta did the same, and then each woman repeated the act until they had both drawn three cards. The silence hung heavy in the room. Carlotta finally reached out and overturned the eleven of lions, then looked up at Nerissa expectantly. Nerissa had a momentary urge to sweep the cards from the table, but she forced it down. Praying that her hand would not tremble, she chose a card at random and revealed the archangel of crowns.

"Oh, my goodness. What a lucky draw." Carlotta smiled and clucked her tongue in mock annoyance, but Nerissa was certain she heard genuine and vigorous displeasure in her voice. Nerissa was nearly sure to win now, and she relaxed. The only question was how to negotiate the exact size of the dowry once the card game was over.

Carlotta overturned the nine of crowns, and Nerissa answered immediately with the three of serpents. Carlotta hesitated for the first time that Nerissa could remember, her hand hovering over her last card.

"We could call it a draw," she suggested, her eyebrow arched, her voice honeyed. "What with the stakes so high, it would only be fair to give you one last chance to back out."

Nerissa was certain now that the woman was daft. With the second-highest card in the deck showing, Nerissa could virtually not fail to win. Why would she call it a draw? And who backed out of a card game before the turn of the final card? Horror seized her, and she wondered if the old woman was reneging on the stakes altogether. Perhaps she was in as much debt as Nerissa. Perhaps she never had a coin to bestow on the family, and this was all a mad game of hers. Perhaps…

But perhaps not. Nerissa would see this farce out to the very end if it promised even the slightest hope of marrying Elizabeth off. She returned Carlotta's smile of benevolent politeness and waved the idea away with one hand. "And deprive you of the chance to win? Never. You might have the archangel of stars there as we speak."

Carlotta looked down at the card as if she was considering the possibility that the deck's archangel of stars was truly beneath her fingers, then snapped the card over with such force that Nerissa jumped.

The two of lions.

Both women laughed, a well-practiced titter that trivialized awkward moments and reassured those present that decorum had not been irreparably breached. But Nerissa could feel tension drain from her body like a vile liquid, and Carlotta's free hand clamped around the head of her walking stick with a fierce grip. Her shrunken fingers hovered over the card, as if there were a way she could flip it again to produce a different result.

"Oh, my dear Carlotta. I'm afraid you gave me a bit of a start…" Nerissa began, but once again, the woman stood up briskly and made her way out of the room without a backward glance. Nerissa followed her, unsure exactly how to broach the subject of the payment of the dowry. She finally decided that if Carlotta meant to welch on the bet, there was nothing to lose, and if she meant to honor it, Nerissa was obviously going to have to bring up the topic before Carlotta made it out the front door.

"Yes, well, then, Carlotta. We should discuss—"

"No."

The single word trailed behind the departing woman like a foul vapor, and Nerissa gasped. Carlotta wheeled on her as she reached the door.

"No, we should not discuss. You—you, Madam Natoli, must consider the stakes. And if you wish me to return tomorrow, I shall. But we shall not discuss."

And with that she was gone.

Nerissa watched the carriage clatter away into the night with a heavy heart. Had it all been in vain? Was this the last she would see of Carlotta, and had her fortune just been a cruel delusion? Nerissa clenched her fists. A dowry for Elizabeth. That was all she wanted. If everything else was taken from her, she could still show her face, knowing she had secured a life of comfort and beauty for her sister, who really had little to recommend her but her beauty, and no preparation for a life of anything but comfort.

She stared out into the darkness, half expecting a dowry to visit itself upon her like some miraculous apparition, and she shook her head and chided herself for such foolish fantasies. Carlotta was gone; Ashton was gone; the game was over; and Elizabeth would be forced to marry a vulgar commoner, if she could find even that. Nerissa mulled over her options and decided that another round of letters to the various creditors, begging their patience, could do no harm, and besides, she could think of nothing else to do at this point. She gave a last look out into the gloom, then turned back into the house and closed the door behind her.

"Maurice?" she called out, and the elderly footman appeared from around a corner.

"Yes, madam?"

"Fetch a lamp to my study. I have letters to write." She heard the bite in her voice and regretted it. Maurice was loyal to the end, and she should not let her disappointment turn into bitterness toward him. "Thank you, Maurice," she added, and he acknowledged this rare familiarity with a gracious nod as he shuffled away down the hallway.

Nerissa stood a moment in the entryway of the house, loath to actually sit down to the task of begging creditors for yet another extension, and decided there was no rush; she wouldn't be able to write until Maurice arrived with the lamp anyway. She felt curdled, tightened, and cornered, like an animal held at bay by hounds. She wondered if she just remained motionless, if she just didn't move, whether she could somehow put off the inevitable.

The knock at the door was so soft that Nerissa thought she'd imagined it at first. Then it came again, louder, more insistent. Her heart leapt, and she forced herself into composure. There was no reason to suspect that this had anything to do with her childish fantasy of a magical dowry, and no reason to believe it would turn out any better than had Ashton's return. She moved to the door as the knocking sounded again and, dispensing with protocol, decided to open it herself.

The boy at the door hardly looked capable of making such a racket, but he tipped his hat to Nerissa and ducked his head when he saw her, and produced a sealed letter from his pouch.

"As it please you, ma'am, a letter for you." She took the proffered letter and noticed the elaborate seal pressed into the wax that, along with a length of black silk ribbon, held the folded note shut. She offered a coin to the boy, but he fairly recoiled. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but I'm not to take payment. Been paid already, haven't I?"

Nerissa smiled at his earnestness and held out the coin again. The boy raised his hands as if to ward it off, and Nerissa's smile faded. "No, ma'am, please. I have me orders." The boy was clearly in fear, and he backed away, keeping his eye on the coin as if Nerissa might somehow thrust it upon him against his will. Who had sent the child with such dire imprecations? What an odd thing to do. She tried to laugh it off, but her voice caught in her throat and would not come out.

Closing the door behind her, she examined the seal. It was a coat of arms, but one she was not familiar with. Someone from beyond Westmarch? Who could possibly have business with her…?

Dread climbed up from the pit of her stomach as she realized that she had no idea where Ashton had been these many months, and no way of knowing whom he might have borrowed money from. There could be yet more creditors, ones with family names behind them. Ones willing to send a letter a great distance to claim what was owed them…

Frustrated with her overactive imagination, Nerissa broke the seal and untied the ribbon. She opened the letter and read it, first with apprehension, then with curiosity, and then with trembling hands and a lighter heart than she'd felt in months.

A dowry. The impossible had happened. A dowry for Elizabeth. Nerissa blessed Carlotta and whatever angel in the High Heavens had sent her, and called out her sister's name.

"Elizabeth! Come here at once!"

Her voice sounded foreign, indecorously loud, almost startling in the quiet house. She read the letter over again, and there could be no doubt. This was the promised miracle. She had wagered everything and won the only thing she truly cared for.

"Nerissa, dearest, whatever is it?" Elizabeth came trotting down the staircase, clad in her ridiculous autumnal gown, leaves flapping and trailing behind her. Nerissa noticed that some even fluttered in her wake, dislodged by her haste, and giggled at the thought of Elizabeth losing her leaves like a fading autumn tree. She caught herself, disturbed by the idea somehow, and bestowed her most gracious and benevolent smile upon her worried sister.

"Elizabeth, we have had some very good news. Apparently, the viscount"—she looked again at the letter to be certain of the name—"the viscount Delfinus is a distant relation of ours. He has unfortunately passed away." She tried to make her face grave, but it was hardly worth the effort. "But before he died, he set aside funds for his youngest unmarried relations."

She paused to let Elizabeth peal with joy, but the girl merely stared at her, waiting for her to explain.

"A dowry, Elizabeth. You have been provided with a dowry. And a generous one at that."

Elizabeth squealed and clapped her hands like a delighted child, bouncing up and down in her glee. For once Nerissa did not see fit to try to constrain her sister's outburst. Her months of scraping, saving, and begging had finally paid off. Elizabeth was to be married, and all of Westmarch society would see Nerissa Natoli hold her head high once again.

"A dowry! I shall be married properly, to a gentleman." Elizabeth pirouetted, her leaves rustling madly. Nerissa restrained the urge to chide the girl—this was, after all, a moment of triumph. Let the child bounce and flit about if she had to.

"Maurice!" Elizabeth fairly shrieked. Nerissa winced at the volume of her sister's call, but before she could say anything, the girl had grasped her hands and was chattering at her, joy shining from her face.

"Shall he be a soldier as well? Captain Donne is said to be looking for a wife, and he is quite a handsome gentleman. Or a courtier, perhaps? Raymond Haston danced with me half the night at Madam Whittington's last season, and I think he fancies me. And Celeste says that there are several gentlemen from Entsteig coming across the gulf for Madam Lancaster's revel, and there's sure to be a suitable one among them…"

Nerissa nodded vaguely at the girl's chatter. There would be time for choosing a husband soon enough, and she smiled over Elizabeth's shoulder at Maurice, who

hobbled as quickly as he could toward them, concern on his face, carrying the lamp in one hand.

"Oh, I must tell Maurice at once! I must—Maurice!" Elizabeth spun away from Nerissa with such force that she nearly collided with the old servant, who reached out a hand to steady the girl. Elizabeth stumbled away, her foot caught in the raveled hem of her gown, and grabbed desperately for the man's arm. She seized it, pulling him off balance, and the lamp crashed to the stone floor, flaming oil pooling between them.

Nerissa screamed and then caught herself. Elizabeth and Maurice stepped carefully away from the fiery puddle and looked to her like startled children. She tried to think, but for a long instant, the dancing flames mesmerized her. Then she snapped at Maurice, "A broom. Fetch a broom and beat the fire out." The old man hobbled off and Nerissa glanced around to see if anything flammable was near the blazing oil. She returned her gaze to Elizabeth, who fairly shuddered with excitement and fear, and Nerissa forced a smile onto her face. "It's all right, Elizabeth. Everything's going to be…"

She trailed off as her eyes followed the curl of smoke downward to the hem of Elizabeth's costume. One of the parchment leaves was smoldering, and as Nerissa watched, it burst into a tiny, bright, writhing flame. The fire raced across the parchment leaf and leapt to another, and before Nerissa could break the trance, a half-dozen were ablaze. She screamed in earnest now and hurried around the flaming pool just as Elizabeth looked down and saw the blaze for herself. Before Nerissa could reach her, the girl howled in pure terror and bolted away from the burning oil, fanning the flames into a conflagration that covered half the dress. Nerissa chased after her,

but Elizabeth was in full panic, dashing down the hall ahead of her sister, screaming wildly. Nerissa caught her finally and held her, the heat beating against her face, Elizabeth thrashing violently to get free. Nerissa slapped at the fire with her hands, but it only grew, sparks swirling up around her. Elizabeth cried in pain as the flames blossomed in her hair, and wrenched herself away from Nerissa, who seized the dress and pulled with all her might. The old seams came apart, and the dress peeled off of Elizabeth, who collapsed on the floor. Nerissa leapt to her, beating out the flames in her hair, sick to her stomach from the smell of burnt flesh.

Nerissa had immediately sent Maurice for the healers, and to her eternal gratitude, they had not only come, but come quickly. They had labored over Elizabeth for hours, and they had saved her life, but not her beauty. Her face was marred by sticky red welts, which the healers told her would eventually resolve into scars. Her hair had been shorn, the scalp half covered in wet, gaping sores and charred flesh. One eye had been ruined, the brow dipping grotesquely over the empty socket. What was left of her lips twisted into an anguished, mocking sneer.

Nerissa had sat by the bedside until dawn, when the ointments and medicinal draughts had finally allowed Elizabeth to pass into a fitful slumber, and she had thought about her mistake. She had taken the old woman too lightly—that much was obvious—but more than that, Carlotta had undone everything Nerissa had tried to achieve. The dowry had been as much for her as for Elizabeth, she realized, and she ground her teeth in frustration. If it were only her, she would never see that horrid woman again. She would retreat into gentile poverty and lick her wounds, but she

could not bear what had happened to Elizabeth. Carlotta had used her desires against her, and Elizabeth had suffered terribly for it—and would suffer the rest of her hideous life unless Nerissa could somehow undo what had been done.

Twice she had gambled for the wealth she desperately craved, and twice something terrible had befallen those close to her. The old witch was not going to trick her a third time. A cold and bitter certainty came over her, and she knew what she had to do. Tonight, Nerissa would be ready for her. Tonight, she would raise the stakes. And yet tonight, it would not matter if she won or lost.

Maurice peeked out through the chamber's heavy drapes and gazed at the street below like an elderly hawk. He blamed himself for what had happened to Elizabeth, and while Nerissa had done her best to reassure him, she could not tell him the truth behind the horrible accident. So he took up his new post like a soldier in the field, and he watched the street for the carriage they both expected. If he found it strange that Nerissa was entertaining guests and playing cards on the heels of two tragedies, he did not say so.

Nerissa forced herself not to pour another cup of wine and considered, once again, Carlotta's impending arrival. The thought had come to her that she did not *have* to play another game with the old creature. She could turn her away from her door. But that, of course, would not be necessary; she knew that Carlotta would only arrive if

Nerissa wished her to. And she knew that Carlotta would arrive without fail if that was what Nerissa wished.

She listened to a distant clock toll the hour out over the town and shuddered. She wondered what decrepit warren the woman had crawled out of, and it occurred to her that what had happened when she won at cards would likely seem mild compared to what would happen if she lost. Whispered tales of bloody hearts ripped still beating from victims' chests came to her, but she pushed the grisly images aside; Carlotta would soon be here, and Nerissa needed her wits about her. The old woman was like some sort of demon who could be called up by the mere utterance of her name. Nerissa silently mouthed the syllables, imagining that she was summoning a loathsome, foul spirit from a festering pit.

"Madam," Maurice croaked, "there she is."

Nerissa's smile of amusement froze into a grimace of sour determination. "Very well, Maurice. Let her in." Nerissa leaned back in her chair and contemplated the cards again. Twice now they had won for her, and yet she had lost more with each game. But tonight would be different, she thought, and she poured herself a cup of wine. Tonight, if all went according to plan, it would not matter that this was almost the last bottle in the house, she mused as she rolled the spicy drink around her mouth. Of course, with this—this witch, or demon, or whatever the woman was, she could not be sure that things *would* go according to plan. But she was resolute. She had committed herself, and now it was time to see the game through. Stationing Maurice at the curtains had been her first move in the new gambit. She was not going to be taken by surprise this evening.

However, instead of the knock at the door, Nerissa heard the hard staccato clatter of that dreadful ebony cane on the marble floors. Maurice couldn't possibly have hobbled down to open the door that quickly, and in fact, she had not heard the great oaken door open at all. Yet Carlotta was in her house, already scuttling up her stairs, coming closer with each insistent crack of the cane upon the steps.

Nerissa listened to the noise mount the staircase and then approach the chamber, Maurice shuffling after it. Carlotta fairly stormed into the room, and Maurice announced, "Madam Carlotta," rather pointlessly.

Nerissa very deliberately did not rise to meet her guest. She sank deeper into the chair. She sensed that Carlotta was as hungry for the game as she was, and had decided to let the old woman pursue her this time.

Carlotta gave no indication that she had registered the slight, but Nerissa knew social politics too well to be fooled. The old woman sat down with a grunt, her hands gripping her cane. Nerissa finally raised her eyes from the cards and smiled a tight, artificial smile at her.

"Wine?"

Carlotta smiled back, her teeth barely showing. "Thank you. No."

The women stared at each other, and Nerissa assessed Carlotta, no longer the rosy-cheeked dowager she had first met in the carriage. The cheeks were sunken, the lips cracked, the teeth… sharper somehow. A light of desperate, ravenous hunger gleamed from her eyes, and it occurred to Nerissa that the past nights might have been hard on the ancient creature. She had exerted herself to bring grave and horrible

suffering into Nerissa's house and had taken nothing in return. Nerissa took another sip of wine, allowing the silence to hang in the air. Her mother had taught her it was a dreadful mistake to ever let your adversary know how much you wanted something—a necessity was a weakness, she had told her. Yet Nerissa knew just from the way that Carlotta's shriveled hands wrapped and twined restlessly about the head of her cane that this creature felt keenly the necessity of tonight's game. Very well, then. That would be the lever by which she moved her.

Nerissa picked up the velvet-covered jewelry box and opened it, holding it for Carlotta to peruse the contents. "We've wagered words and promises, but these heirlooms are diamonds and gold. Are you sure you wouldn't rather play for more… substantial stakes?"

Something like panic flickered in Carlotta's eyes, and her jaw tightened for a moment before she smiled obsequiously. "No, my dear. That would never do. If I am to grant you your dearest wish, you must offer me your most valuable possession." Her tongue flicked over her lips with reptilian dexterity, and Nerissa imagined it forked and hissing. She nodded her assent.

At that, Carlotta broke into a genuine yet deeply malicious grin. "And what shall I wager tonight? What, tonight, is the thing you wish for most?"

Nerissa smiled easily, but her heart beat forcefully within her chest. She had no doubt that this woman would somehow claim it if she lost. She framed her words carefully but cloaked them in nonchalance. "I would only have Elizabeth happy and beautiful again."

Carlotta drew breath to answer, but Nerissa cut her off with a raised finger.

"But, I will play tonight under the condition that Elizabeth also have her happiness and beauty for the duration of our game, until I turn my last card."

Carlotta glared at her, nonplussed. "You would have your stakes before you win them? Nonsense."

"If they are yours to grant, they are yours to take away if I lose." Nerissa smiled sweetly. "All I ask is that Elizabeth have some brief time of happiness and beauty. Unless, of course, you'd rather play for lesser stakes?" She vaguely waved a hand toward the open jewelry box, and Carlotta shook her head, her face torn between anger and anxiety.

"No. Of course not. But you ask too much. You cannot have your stakes before you win them."

Nerissa felt herself balanced on a tightrope of decorum, weighing Carlotta's determination to have her own way against the foul creature's obvious hunger. She smiled with practiced ease and gauged the uncertainty in Carlotta's eyes, the nervous twitching of the fingers, the eager pitch of her shoulders. She was the very picture of necessity, mask it though she tried.

Nerissa stared hard at Carlotta for a long moment, then shrugged her shoulders as if in defeat and indicated the jewelry box again. She cocked her head insolently to one side, daring Carlotta to accept the jewels and baubles.

Carlotta seethed, her teeth bared.

"So be it." She clapped her hands, and Nerissa gasped in spite of herself. For an instant, the lamplight had flickered, and in the shadows Carlotta's eyes had glowed like burning embers. The old woman smiled, triumphant and predatory, and Nerissa fought to regain her composure. Carlotta was even more withered and worn-looking than she had been just a moment ago. But she had never looked more deadly.

Immediately, the patter of bare feet came down the hallway, almost at a run. Carlotta held Nerissa's gaze, the hint of a satisfied smirk twitching one corner of her mouth. Nerissa smiled benevolently, as if regarding a favored guest at a dinner party. Her stomach twisted in a painful knot, but her face beamed with bland goodwill.

The door burst open, and neither woman moved. Elizabeth ran to Nerissa's side, wearing only her shift, her golden tresses loose about her shoulders, her fine features more radiant and beautiful than ever.

"Oh, Nerissa, I've had the strangest dream. It was… it… oh, dear." She giggled, her fingers to her mouth. "I've forgotten what it was."

Nerissa finally looked up at her, turning her head with casual precision. "That's quite amusing, Elizabeth, dear. But I'm afraid I have a rather important guest at the moment."

Elizabeth seemed to see Carlotta for the first time and recoiled slightly. "Oh, I'm so sorry to interrupt. Whatever was I thinking?" She appeared to be at a loss, terrified by the horrid crone but too entranced to break away. "I should… go now?"

The old woman regarded Elizabeth, and the girl shrank back behind Nerissa's chair. "Yes, Elizabeth," Carlotta croaked, her fingers tightening on the head of the ebony cane. "Say goodbye to your sister."

Nerissa's eyes narrowed to slits, and Carlotta grinned with plain cruelty, all pretense of civility gone. Nerissa kept her gaze fixed on Carlotta a moment longer, then turned a genuine and loving smile on her disconcerted sister. "Goodbye, Elizabeth," she whispered, and Elizabeth involuntarily backed away.

"Goodbye," she answered uncertainly, then turned, nearly running from the room.

"Now." Carlotta cut the cards, and Nerissa hesitated, then drew. When the six cards lay on the table, she felt doubt flicker through her again. She forced it down, determined to see this through. She revealed her rightmost card and repressed the excitement at seeing the bishop of stars. Carlotta made a tiny noise of disapproval and turned over the five of serpents. She looked up at Nerissa with rank eagerness in her eyes, and Nerissa had to restrain herself from drawing back.

She reached out, uncertain, then flipped the left card and heard Carlotta's rude giggle. The two of lions wasn't going to help much. Nerissa glanced at the jewelry box as Carlotta's hand hovered over her two remaining cards, finally descending on one.

She positively crowed with delight as she snapped over the archangel of stars. She chuckled and bobbled up and down in her seat, while Nerissa's head swam. The

highest card in the deck. She looked down at her last card, knowing that it mattered not in the least. And yet…

"Come now, dearie." Carlotta didn't even bother to mask her malevolent glee. "Turn it over. Let's bring this to an end, shall we?" Her smile was pure predation, and Nerissa found herself wondering how the old witch took people's hearts. Did she suck them out of their mouths? Rip open the chests with those clawlike fingers? Or simply chew through the breastbones like a hideously oversized rat?

She shook her head to dismiss such horrors and smiled at Carlotta. "Of course, it's not too late to call it a draw. Or to change the stakes…" She picked up the jewelry box once again and fingered the sapphire on the comb, traced the jewels of the stiletto's handle.

"No," snapped the old woman, leaning forward in her chair. "You agreed. You have lost. Now turn over the card and let us finish the game."

"Yes," Nerissa answered, pure steel in her voice. "Let us finish the game." And with a swift motion, she drew the stiletto from its sheath. Carlotta shrieked and raised the cane to ward off the blow, unnatural flame flaring from its handle, but Nerissa flipped the knife and plunged the blade into her own chest. Crimson blood spurted, splashing the cards, and Carlotta recoiled, snarling in animal rage. The bright arterial blood hit the table with gouts of steadily decreasing force, until Nerissa's eyes rolled in her head and she slumped back into her chair. The blood leaked gently now, slowly soaking her brocade bodice.

Carlotta sat still for a long time, her breath coming in shallow pants, her forked tongue licking scaled lips. Her gaze shifted from the cooling corpse to the unfinished game on the table.

From somewhere in the house she heard the muffled patter of Elizabeth's feet and realized, with mounting distaste, that the spell she'd cast on the young woman would last until the game ended. The crone hissed and reached out to flip over Nerissa's final card, but she stopped herself short. The act would be futile. The terms of the game were set, unbreakable.

Until I turn my last card, Nerissa had said.

With great effort, Carlotta rose to her feet, leaning heavily on her cane.

"Well played, my dear. Well played indeed."

She turned her back on the blood-soaked cards and, with slow, painful steps, hobbled from the room.

JOURNALS

WRITINGS OF ABD AL-HAZIR

ENTRY 2: CALDEUM

Caldeum was once the proudest city in all of Kehjistan, the trade capital of the entire world. Caldeum was never seen as the heart of the empire, even though it rivaled Viz-jun, and later Kurast, in size, and those who called Caldeum their home liked it that way. Even when the Mage Clan Wars erupted, the battles were never tolerated to affect trade in Caldeum, for while politics and magic may be important, trifling with trade is a serious matter. Let Kurast see itself as the center of the world, they would say. We'll keep our free exchange of goods, currency, and ideas, thank you very much.

But the pride I once held in this great city has become tarnished and dull. In looking back on it all, now, I would have to say that this rot infecting our city started when a good number of Kurast's nobles fled their homes and took up residence in Caldeum. I have heard all the horrific and unbelievable rumors as to why they fled their great city, but the reasons did not concern us. It was their attitude that held our concern. As relief at being safe from whatever drove them here faded, their mood changed to entitlement and then, ultimately, to arrogance. They had no trouble demanding their "rightful" place on the trade consortium council governing our city, and they were prepared to use their wealth to hire the mercenaries needed to see their ambitions through.

I was initially dubious when the emperor of Kehjistan emerged to confront this quickly deteriorating situation. But the charm, leadership, and intelligence that he brought to bear as he quickly resolved the conflict between our council and the Kurast nobles were nothing less than masterful. When the people fully supported him in his role as our emperor, I saw this achievement as nothing short of a miracle. Though we had always been part of the empire of Kehjistan, and therefore under his rule, we had always behaved as if we were a free entity, beholden to no one but ourselves. It truly seemed at the time that catastrophe had been averted, but now it has become all too apparent that it was merely hidden beneath a thin veneer of civility.

This veneer began to shed when Emperor Hakan became ill. His influence started to wane, and the mood in Caldeum changed with his health. As he got worse, so did our once fair city.

When he died and his ineffectual child heir took the throne, Caldeum began to circle the abyss. Our list of ills seems never-ending: the state of our downtrodden and the slums they are forced to live in, our incompetent leadership, the reemergence of the intolerant Zakarum, and their quarrels with our mage class...I could go on for pages.

It is all too much for one to bear, really.

Entry 3: Encounter with Burrowing Death (Part I)

As I was preparing to set pen to paper to begin recording my thoughts at the beginning of my epic undertaking to gather the world's knowledge together in one tome, the hand of providence tapped me on the shoulder. The news that a rogue burrower had killed a citizen just outside the city gave me the wonderful opportunity to see firsthand one of the more disturbing creatures we share this world with – the savage dune thresher.

Long ago driven away from settled locales to the deep desert wastes of the Borderlands, the dune thresher is rarely seen by city dwellers. Every so often, however, whether due to injury or old age, one of these unholy beasts ventures to the edge of civilization to feast on the frail human animal. When this happens, a professional like Franklin Burroughs, the famed guide and hunter, is called in to put an end to the threat.

Fortunately, Burroughs and I, both being men of travel and adventure, have naturally crossed paths before (frequent readers of my works will no doubt remember this grizzled, rough-hewn boulder of a man from my classic, Xiansai Chronicles). Thus, I contacted him so that I was able to take part in his quest to rid us of the burrowing nightmare. He acted reluctant at first, but I could tell he was happy to have me along.

I met up with him at dusk upon the sandy rocks that ringed the Tardein wastes. As I approached, Burroughs was kneeling on the black rocks, inspecting something. I looked at the indistinguishable matter he'd been staring so intently at, but I could not identify it. He held up his hand, motioning for me to step lightly. When I asked him what the problem was, he pointed to the focus of his attention and asked if I wanted to end up like that poor fool. I laughed, thinking he was playing one of his jokes on me yet again. Everyone knew that the dune threshers attacked from under the sand, and that we were safe upon the rocks!

"Tell that to him," he said.

I looked again, and what I saw turned my stomach. The rocks betrayed the desperation with which the victim had clung to them. Left upon their bloodstained surfaces were strips of skin that had been torn from his hands and fingers.

"They'll jump right up onto these rocks and drag you down. An experienced hunter could survive an attack, but someone like you will be lunch if you keep stomping around here, making all that noise." He chuckled to himself as he made his way up to his heavily loaded wagon.

I quickly (and quietly) moved back from the edge of the rocks. And then I heard the screeching. Burroughs had retrieved a large object, a cage of some kind, covered with a black tarp. This cage was the source of the hellish emanations. Thick ropes hung down from somewhere deep beneath its dark shroud. "That's not far enough," he said. As if to prove his point, he shook the cage he was holding. Ever viler screams shot forth, cutting

through my head like cold, sharp blades. But they were nothing to the sound I heard next – the deathly churning of sand that heralded the arrival of the thresher.

"Their sound riles a thresher up something fierce. Better get them into the sand before we have company up here." With that, he tore the cover off the cage. The shock of seeing what was contained within overwhelmed me immediately. Everything seemed to wash together in a kind of bland, sickening greyness, and my knees buckled.

Entry 4: Encounter with Burrowing Death (Part 2)

As I began to fall, Burroughs grabbed me by the scruff of my collar and shook me violently. "You really want to feed some thresher, don't you, al-Hazir?" he asked. "What, haven't you seen scavengers before?"

I had indeed seen scavengers: small, burrowing creatures that feed upon carrion. Unlike most animals of this type, however, they are extremely aggressive and will not hesitate to attack those unfortunate enough to encounter them. Scavengers have powerful legs which they use for swift springing attacks, striking at vulnerable faces and throats. Their anatomy bears a striking resemblance to that of the leapers of the Aranochdesert, and thus, many researchers classify the two groups as part of the same family of creatures. An ensorcelled (some say demonic) variant is known to have plagued adventurers in the Tristram region twenty-odd years ago as well. Scavengers were also the cause of an extremely distressing episode during my youth, which I need not relate at this juncture.

"Yep. Burrowers to catch a burrower," he said. He then took the lengths of rope hanging from the cage and impaled them on the ground using a heavy pike. He also attached what looked like long knives to the sides of his heavy, scarred boots, and drove the blades into the ground.

"You'd better get out of the way." And with that, while holding onto the ropes, he undid the latching mechanism on the side of the cage. He then threw it out onto the sand. The cage exploded outward with the scavengers' frantic attempts to escape their confines. I barely had time to wonder how Burroughs had been able to get the collars (that the ropes were attached to) around the scavengers' necks before the vicious beasts had burrowed into the soft ground.

I was extremely tense by this point. I felt naked and exposed. What insanity had convinced me that coming out here was a good idea?

I looked out over the wastes in the fading light, trying to detect the telltale horned fins of the thresher cutting through the surface of the sand.

With absolutely no warning, the dune thresher violently broke the surface, all three scavengers caught in his horrifying maw. There was a massive explosion of sand as the thresher dove back into the ground with its prize. The ropes immediately snapped taut, and I thought Burroughs would be pulled to his death. I didn't understand how he thought he could reel in a monster that huge, but he wasn't even trying – just holding on.

After several tense seconds that stretched towards eternity, the rope began making weird jerking motions.

"Ah. The little buggers are doing their work." He smiled a ghastly smile. "Shouldn't be long now."

A few more moments of this strangeness passed, and the thrashing of the ropes became less and less. Finally, he began to haul his catch in. When it was partially on the rocks, I could see what had happened. The thresher had swallowed the scavengers whole, and they, in turn, had begun eating their way out of the thresher's stomach before the beast's digestive juices had killed them. One scavenger still clung to life, but barely. It had actually dug itself halfway out of the thresher, clawing at the air as its skin was slowly eaten away. I vomited.

Burroughs, laughing at me once again as he cut off the beast's triangular head, began lecturing me on the amazing dune thresher: the dynamics of its jutting, angular lower jaw, which cuts a path through the soil; the way this jaw design enables the thresher to swim effortlessly beneath the sand with unimaginable swiftness; and much more that I didn't care to hear just then. I nodded my head weakly and wondered how long it would be before I could politely get myself home and crawl into bed.

ENTRY 6: BORDERLANDS

After my encounter with the savage dune thresher (see Encounter with Burrowing Death, entry 004), one might think it natural were I hesitant to venture into the wastes surrounding Caldeum. Those who have set foot upon the Borderlands' burning yellow landscape and looked out upon its miles of barren sand roiling with terrible wildlife would surely agree with this sentiment.

It was not always thus. In years past, I could have ventured forth with no concern for my safety. Though the Borderlands are among the most savage habitats in our world, even these deadly lands were no match for the superior resolve of Caldeum in its prime.

The Borderlands were originally devoid of any but the most hardened (some would say crazed) prospectors until the great military city of Lut Bahadur (literally, "city of the gate") was built to keep the lacuni in their cliff dwellings safely away from Caldeum. Lut Bahadur's solitary watch over the desolate wastes came to an end four hundred years ago when precious ore was discovered in the region known as the Stinging Winds. The town of Alcarnus was quickly established as the center of all mining in the area, with several other smaller settlements springing up in its wake. When the Dahlgur oasis was discovered and a third town was erected there, Caldeum's dominance over the Borderlands was complete. The Borderlands could reliably depend on fresh supplies of food and water from Dahlgur's caravans, protected by the might of Caldeum's Dune Guard.

But Hakan II, our young and inexperienced sovereign, has seen fit to withdraw the support of Caldeum from the wastes and leave those who live there to their own devices. Now, no caravan is safe, and refugees from the Borderlands beat against the gates of Caldeum in an endless wave of displaced humanity, desperate for the salvation our city once provided. I have spoken with many of these poor folk at length, and the tales they share would give even the most stalwart adventurer pause. Though their stories of a secret cult intent on raising a demonic army are obviously embellished due to their lack of knowledge pertaining to such things, their hysteria and suffering have convinced me that something terrible indeed stalks the Borderlands.

ENTRY 7: THE WIZARD

Owing to my lack of tolerance for those who would use magic towards their own nefarious ends, many have assumed that I am averse to the practice of the magical arts on a philosophical level. Nothing could be farther from the truth. My quarrel is with those sorcerers who dismiss the ancient traditions and teachings – teachings that have been honed over millennia in order to preserve respect for authority and the rule of law.

Recently the youth of Caldeum have fallen prey to the overblown stories of just such a delinquent wizard. That is correct: I used the uncouth term wizard, not sorcerer. It seems that even the title of a civilized magic wielder is too restrictive for this young upstart.

Through my contacts at the Yshari Sanctum of the mage clans, I am one of the few who actually know the truth behind the rumors now sweeping our streets regarding this hellion who flaunts her magic irresponsibly.

This wizard was sent here to spend her formative years under the tutelage of the best mages in the world. Well, it seems they neglected to teach our wizard manners on her native island of Xiansai, for she was a rude and uncooperative student from the very beginning. Originally under the guidance of the Zann Esu mage clan, she was eventually

handed over to the Vizjerei in the hopes that their strict and unbending discipline would break her anarchic spirit. Yet even the esteemed Vizjerei instructors were unable to rein her in. She was continually being caught seeking out dangerous and forbidden magics, heedless of the consequences to herself or anyone around her.

Although there is no truth to the tales that she actually ventured into the infamous Bitter Depthsbelow the Sanctum, she was caught in the Ancient Repositories, where the most dangerous incantations are housed for the safety of the public. When confronted by the great Vizjerei mage Valthek and demanded to account for herself, she brazenly attacked him rather than face the punishment merited by her acts. Exaggerated stories of the battle are already being inflated to mythic proportions by the more rebellious of our city's youth, but suffice it to say that she did not actually best Yshari's most powerful mage in single, honorable combat. The details of the encounter remain unclear, as Valthek has yet to regain consciousness, but it has been verified by reliable sources that she relied on trickery and deceit to bring the great man low. I have also been assured that the extensive property damage was chiefly the result of Valthek's magical prowess, not the upstart wizard's. As to where she is now, no one rightly knows, for she fled the city immediately after the encounter.

It is not my goal to alarm, but I find this situation disturbing. We now have a rebellious wizard, young and inexperienced, wandering the world, dabbling in powerful magics she does not understand. Those wiser than you or I determined long ago that certain schools of magic were too dangerous and forbade their practice. It is those magics that this wizard seems determined to explore – magics centered on manipulating the primal forces from which reality is constructed. Imagine, a headstrong nineteen-year-old youth, able to warp time itself to her will! The thought is truly terrifying. It is my honest hope that this self-styled wizard chooses never to return to Caldeum.

ENTRY 8: THE SKELETAL UNDEAD

The undead are a pox upon our world, yet no one sees fit to look into their existence and find a way to rid us of them once and for all. How long until we are confronted by the terrifying specter of an undead army of skeletal warriors raised by some crazed sorcerer or would-be demigod? Do not let the scarce reports of skeleton attacks lull you into assuming we are safe; we are never safe from these unholy legions. They are coming, mark my words.

Despite the fact that skeletons seem mischievous or imbecilic, they are nothing to scoff at. We should neither dismiss them from our consideration, nor ignore the problem they represent. It is far past the time for serious inquiry into their exact nature. Since I am overly qualified on many subjects pertinent to this area of inquiry, apparently it falls to me to rectify this lack of understanding. After completing many months of long, arduous study, I now present the information I have gleaned from my research into these unholy monstrosities.

Contrary to what I had assumed, a reanimated skeleton is actually constructed from bits and pieces of any number of different skeletons, not a single one. Their diverse composition gives them the ability to form and reform, and makes them easily summoned, permitted there is adequate raw material at hand. Still, this is not to say that a skilled necromancer could not call forth a cadre of skeletal warriors to do his bidding anywhere he chooses. He merely requires less effort to construct a skeleton army in a graveyard than in the middle of a forest.

Furthermore, I have come to believe that a skeleton's intelligence is limited by the power and scope of the spell used in the creature's creation. Theoretically one could have a single astute skeleton servant or a rather dense army of a hundred for the same expenditure of magical energy. I am at a loss to explain the average skeleton's somewhat ludicrous mental predisposition, however. Perhaps the implausibility of its own existence makes the skeleton think it hilarious to hide in a barrel, cackling intermittently for some three hundred years until a victim happens by?

In contrast to the other undead horrors our world has been plagued with – namely the mindless zombies and the pack-hunting ghouls – skeletons are much more dangerous as a whole because of their ability to be organized and directed. Based on the evidence, it takes only slightly more energy to imbue skeletons with enough intelligence to use shields to defend themselves and their allies. These "shield skeletons", as I like to call them, are alarmingly common, though not as numerous as a basic skeletal warrior.

If my aforementioned points do not convince the skeptic of the gravity of this issue, consider the case of the skeletal summoner. This advanced skeletal warrior is specifically created with a higher intelligence that gives it the ability to replenish the undead ranks as needed. Yes, adding summoners to the unholy, undead mix results in a nauseating recipe for a self-sustaining army, capable of renewing itself in perpetuity so as to fulfil whatever diabolical ends its master called it forth to pursue.

It should be apparent to all intelligent readers that any madman needs only the raw material of skeletal remains to create these armies of the undead. The obvious solution is to disinter the graveyards and begin burning the skeletons posthaste. Only then can we be certain that we have removed this deadly threat from the arsenal of those who would do us harm.

ENTRY 9: KHAZRA

The khazra (colloquially known as "goatmen") were long thought to be natural inhabitants of our world, akin to the lacuni "panther-men" tribes of the desert and mountain regions, but I have recently discovered evidence revealing that nothing could be further from the truth. The history of the khazra is much more complex and disturbing than has been previously imagined.

According to ancient carvings that I have succeeded in translating, the khazra were originally human, part of the umbaru race found in the thick Torajan jungles in the Teganze region of the eastern continent. At some point in the distant past, the five clans that would come to be known as the khazra migrated to higher elevations and began developing along different lines than the clansmen they left behind. They lived in relative peace and began the transition from a hunter-gatherer society to a farming one. This state of affairs changed dramatically when they encountered the Vizjerei about two thousand years ago (if my translations prove to be correct).

This was the height of the Mage Clan Wars, and even the mighty Vizjerei mage clan was showing signs of stress brought about by the prolonged struggle. A faction of the Vizjerei resolved to construct an army using demon-possessed victims, and the peaceful umbaru clans seemed to fit the Vizjerei's needs. It is unknown how the clans first came into contact with the Vizjerei, but within the span of a decade or so, some of the future khazra clans had turned from their peaceful existence to all-out warfare with the Vizjerei. This was surely the result of seeing their brothers being painfully transformed into savage goat-like creatures by the Vizjerei.

Though they were primitive by the standards of the Vizjerei, the umbaru clans held the powerful mages at bay through familiarity with the terrain and sheer ferocity. But this state of affairs could not hold forever. As decades of savage warfare took their toll on the umbaru's culture and minds, the clans began to search for any means to prevail over their enemies. In fact, they lost sight of anything else.

Exact details on what transpired next are scarce, but I have ascertained that at some point during the next two hundred years they decided to use the Vizjerei's strength against them. To this end, the clans actively sought to capture a mage to do their bidding. Eventually they succeeded in violently coercing one of their captives to help them not only gain control over their transformed clan mates, but to have themselves transformed as well in order to fully drive the Vizjerei out of the Teganze.

Their strategy worked, but it was not without its price. They found themselves bound in servitude to the demon Zagraal in exchange for their cursed power (note that I neither endorse nor dismiss theories of a "Burning Hell" by the use of the term demon; it is simply used here in its original intent: to describe a being of malevolent or loathsome origin). They became furious marauders, driven to raid villages and caravans to sate their bloodlust and procure sacrificial victims for their demonic master. This is also when they became known as khazra, which roughly translates as "demon" or "devil" in the umbaru tongue.

After years of this terror, their previous brothers, the umbaru of the lower Teganze, sent their sacred witch doctor warriors to eradicate the khazra's threat to the region. Filled with otherworldly power, the witch doctors cut a swath of destruction through the khazra until they confronted Zagraal himself. In a now-legendary battle, the valiant heroes fought to the last man before finally bringing Zagraal down.

The khazra continued to wage war on humanity, but without a source of demonic power to draw from, they became weak. Despite a slight unexplained resurgence twenty or so years ago, their fury steadily drained from them until they became the sluggish and muddled beings we know today.

Addendum: While researching the various hostile wildlife that adventurers regularly encounter in their work, I have been informed that the khazra have regained some of their lost vim and vigor and are once again ferociously attacking humans. As of this writing, such reports remain uncorroborated by reliable sources.

ENTRY 10: THE FALLEN ONES

The fallen ones are a unique breed of true demonic origin, one of the few that I've been able to conclusively verify through sources other than the ancient Vizjerei tomes in my possession. (How I came by said tomes will, of necessity, remain my secret.)

As my readers are well aware, early Vizjerei writings are often little more than self-serving propaganda aimed at whitewashing heinous deeds committed by the mage clan. For instance, we now know that the goatmen were unwitting human victims of an ancient Vizjerei power struggle (see entry 009 for more detailed information on the khazra's tragic history), whereas the ancient Vizjerei texts would have us believe that they were actually demons - lieutenants of Baal, no less!

Through diligent cross-referencing with other manuscripts in my vast library, however, I have ascertained that the Vizjerei depiction of the creatures known as the fallen ones is factually correct.

To quote volume 5 of the Demonicus de Zoltun Kulle:

Fallen Ones (NANUS IMPROBUS)

As hard as it is to believe, the fallen ones were once exalted demons of the Burning Hells. They served as Azmodan's hands, performing acts that he would not, could not involve himself in. They were the instrument of Azmodan's first failed attempt to usurp power from Diablo and his brothers, and after that failure, the fallen were subjected to the full wrath of Diablo. They were twisted into small, ridiculous imps, in contrast to their previously powerful forms. Moreover, if they expected Azmodan to reverse their condition, they were sadly mistaken. The infuriated Azmodan held them responsible for the Prime Evils' continued reign, and so he left the fallen in their new bodies, where their degradation would serve to amuse him for all eternity. Their failure provided him with the information he required to succeed in dethroning Diablo and his brothers - the event now known as the "Dark Exile" - but that fact did nothing to soften his heart toward the fallen.

When unleashed upon our realm by their master, Azmodan, these impish terrors display a tendency to swarm like flesh-hungry locusts, and they have been known to tear apart a sleeping village in minutes. Small of stature and simian in appearance, these creatures possess surprising strength and unnatural agility. Other than feasting on human flesh, the

only act that gives these unspeakable horrors pleasure is breeding; hence the tendency to encounter them in large packs.

However, due to their small size, cowardice appears to be one of the chief features of this species. They quickly retreat when one of their brethren falls in battle.

Fallen ones display no obvious tendency towards greater organization beyond their predisposition to swarm. This is fortunate for humanity, for they are so numerous that if they were to band together in large numbers, they might easily overwhelm a small city.

Through further research, I have identified five distinct types of fallen:

IMPS - These are the commonest of the fallen family of demons. They are the stereotypical fallen ones in look and behavior: small, red, swarming, bloodthirsty, and cowardly.

SHAMAN - Fallen shaman priests lead camps of fallen. I have also heard it rumored that they possess the ability to raise imps from the dead!

LUNATIC - These enraged, oversized fallen creatures are bloated seemingly to the point of bursting, an impression buttressed by the fact that these insane demons rush their intended victims and then stab themselves until they explode. A more fitting name could not be found for these maniacal beings.

OVERSEER - The fallen overseer drives his smaller impish charges into a frenzy with his ape-like leaping and growling. An overseer among a group of fallen is a dangerous thing, as the cowardice that usually characterizes them is overwhelmed by fear of their much larger brethren.

HOUNDS - These slobbering abominations are commonly found among groups of the fallen and are utilized as guard animals, beasts of burden, or even food by their demonic masters. These beasts are loyal to a fault, regardless of the abuse heaped upon them.

I suspect the existence of at least two other types of fallen, but I will need to conduct further research before I reveal my theories as to the ultimate familial structure of these fiends.

ENTRY 13: WITCH DOCTOR

Most believe the fearsome witch doctor of the umbaru race a legend, but I have seen one in battle with my own eyes. And it was difficult to believe, even then. He dispatched his opponent with terrifying precision, assaulting his victim's mind and body with elixirs and powders that evoked fires, explosions, and poisonous spirits. As if these assaults were not enough, the witch doctor also had at his command the ability to summon undead creatures from the netherworld to rend the flesh from his enemy's body.

I came upon this rare display as I ventured deep into the interior of the dense Torajan jungles that cover the southern tip of the great eastern continent, in the vast area known as the Teganze, with the goal of seeking out the tribes that reside there. This area is extremely secluded, and heretofore unseen by foreign eyes. I was fortunate to befriend the witch doctor I saw in battle, and, through him, his tribe: the Tribe of the Five Hills.

The culture of the umbaru of the lower Teganze is fascinating and perplexing to those hailing from more civilized walks of life. For instance, the Tribe of the Five Hills frequently engages in tribal warfare with both the Clan of the Seven Stonesand the Tribe of the Clouded Valley, but these are matters of ritual and not of conquest. I had heard tales that these wars are waged in order that the victors may replenish their supply of raw materials for the human sacrifices that their civilization revolves around, and when I timidly asked my hosts more about this topic, I must admit their laughter made me fear for my safety. However, through stumbled attempts at communication of such complex topics as what constitutes heroism and honor in their society, I gathered that only those taken in battle are considered worthy of the ritual sacrifice, much to my relief.

Upon further discussions with my hosts, I discovered that these tribes define themselves by their belief in the Mbwiru Eikura, which roughly translates to "The Unformed Land" (this is an imprecise translation, as this concept is completely foreign to our culture and language). This belief holds that the true, sacred reality is veiled behind the physical one we normally experience. Their vitally important public ceremonies are centered upon sacrifices to the life force that flows from their gods, who inhabit the Unformed Land, into this lesser physical realm.

The witch doctors are finely attuned to this Unformed Land and are able to train their minds to perceive this reality through a combination of rituals and the use of selected roots and herbs found in the jungles. They call the state in which they interact with this other world the Ghost Trance.

Alongside the primacy of the belief in the life force and the Unformed Land, the second most sacred belief of the tribes is their philosophy of self-sacrifice and non-individuality, of suppressing one's self-interest for the good of the tribe. This idea, so foreign to our culture, struck me as something I wished to delve into much more deeply.

Unfortunately, there was intense social upheaval among the tribes due to an incident involving their most current war (inasmuch as I could discern in the ensuing bedlam), and the charged atmosphere warranted my quick departure before I could ask anything further of my hosts

ENTRY 16: NEW TRISTRAM

We have all heard the tales associated with Tristram. The very mention of its name brings to mind images of undead monstrosities, demonic possession, monarchy driven to lunacy, and, of course, the greatest legend of all: the Lord of Terror unleashed. Although many now claim that a peculiar mold upon the bread or perhaps a fouling of the water drove the populace mad with visions, I have seen too much in my varied travels to dismiss such stories out of hand. It is within this context, then, that I have to say my journey to what is now called "New Tristram" was somewhat of a disappointment.

New Tristram has been in existence for several years, though the exact date of its founding is unclear. Originally simply a collection of merchants looking to profit on adventurers and travellers drawn by legends of riches within the old cathedral, it slowly set down roots and became an established town. As soon as the cathedral was looted bare, however, the adventurers and travellers stopped coming, and New Tristram found itself in decline. The town is now comprised mostly of depressing shacks; the inn is the only building that looks even the least bit habitable.

Before I took my leave of this dreary place, I was cornered by an eccentric old man who seemed to have an endless supply of anecdotes and folksy wisdom to impart. He went on about there still being much of value deep within the cathedral in the form of tomes of ancient origin and wisdom. I will have to take his word for it, for I must admit that while I did explore the burnt remains of the "old" Tristram, I lacked the intestinal fortitude to do much more than take a few hesitating steps within that infamous cathedral of legend.

ENTRY 17: TRISTRAM CATHEDRAL

After seeing the remains of Tristram for myself, I felt the need to search out further information on what it was about the corridors and dungeons underneath its old cathedral that held such mystique.

Originally built as a Horadric monastery sometime around 912 (see my entries pertaining to ancient mystical traditions for more information on the secretive Horadric order), the building was later converted to a Zakarum cathedral. Legend has it that the original monastery was built over the vault where the mythical Diablo was imprisoned, and that his supposed release led to the horrors we all now associate with the name Tristram.

In order to shed light on the many mysteries of the old cathedral, I sought out an old adventurer who had braved its ancient passageways, which were said to lead to the Hells themselves.

"We'd all heard about the weird goings-on in Tristram, but we were drawn by the prospect of getting our hands on some of that loot we heard they were bringing up by the cartload." He paused thoughtfully for a moment and scratched the stub where his left arm had once been. "It ever strike you as strange that wherever monsters are stirring up trouble, that's where you'll find the most treasure? Why can't there ever be a big haul in a safe place?" Obviously he was attempting to ease his tension by making light of the whole event.

"When we got to Tristram, we took our time before we got down to the business of actually going into the cathedral. Town had a nice inn, if I recollect. Truth is, there was something evil coming out of that old church: you could feel it. Now, me and my mates, we didn't want to admit we were scared, so after we ran out of excuses to avoid it, we made our way inside. And let me tell you, I never smelled death like I did in that place. Once inside, we were set upon by the undead," and he paused to see if I would laugh in disbelief at this.

When I didn't, he continued, "That's right, undead. I've faced the undead several times, but you never get used to it. You think you're prepared, but there's just something that sticks in your gut, this horrible feeling. Your hands get slick with sweat, and your sword is hard to grasp correctly...you really doubt your sanity in being down there, facing something like that. And the stench is unimaginable. But we were pulling ourselves through – I had started to come out the other side, where you start to ease into that unsettled feeling and use it to drive yourself forward."

It was at this point that his mood noticeably darkened. I found myself easing a bit closer so as not to miss a single detail.

"Then it started to go wrong. We began encountering these, these dark...things...imps or demons...or fallen, I think they're called. There were so many of them, all horns and flashes of red, attacking us from all sides. I don't think you could ever really be prepared for something like that. We got disoriented, which was easy to do. It was so dark....

"And then we heard this...this horrid voice that I can only describe as the sound of a saw ripping through bone.

"I can't even recollect what he was saying. I was so terrified I don't think I could understand it, but he kept repeating it, over and over." The adventurer shuddered at the remembrance.

"He was this bloated thing...and ...and there was blood, and bodies – everywhere I turned, some new horror confronted me. And suddenly he was on us; we couldn't shake him. Jeremy fell first, and then I ran. I admit it: I ran, left my fellows to die. I couldn't face that thing; it was all just too horrible. He hit me with a glancing blow as I fled, but even that was enough to take my arm almost clean off. I had to have a healer finish the job...."

At this point he trailed off, lost in whatever regrets he has endured to this day.

ENTRY 20: GNARLED WALKERS

As beautiful as a walk through the Tristram wilderness is, with its lush fields and picturesque rivers, the air seems to take on an otherworldly foreboding as one approaches the fishing village of Wortham. My search to catalog the weird, the fabulous, and the all-too-often-dangerous inhabitants of our world had led me there. I hoped to find a guide who could bring me safely into the Festering Woods and back, for I had come to see for myself the strange creatures that are the "gnarled walkers".

What then, you may ask, is a gnarled walker? Is it simply an ensorcelled walking tree – a wood wraith – or is it something more? Does it truly live? These are the questions I sought to answer as I strode into the village of Wortham that bright day, which had somehow turned dark and dreary while my attention was elsewhere. But the few people I encountered in Wortham were a taciturn lot, unwilling to answer my inquiries.

As I inspected my way around the moribund town, it was impossible to ignore the fact that the bridge I hoped to take to the Festering Wood had been destroyed, burned beyond repair. My questions about this circumstance went unanswered. I likewise found it odd that there seemed to be only elderly people in the village, with the exception of one beautiful young woman whose father was quite insistent I keep my distance from her. Though he was rude on this point, I found him to be a rather sociable sort once convinced I was not interested in his daughter. He introduced himself as Pablo DeSoto, and as luck would have it he was very knowledgeable about several topics in regards to magic and the object of my search.

According to Master DeSoto, the Festering Woods derives its name from the fact that everything in it seethes and roils with evil intent: even the ground itself has been known to rise up and devour a person. When pushed further in regards to the gnarled walkers specifically, he pontificated at length as to their true nature. He maintained they are vile mystical creatures from another realm who can only sustain their existence in our world by sapping life energy from men or animals. These heinous beings have shifted their

appearance to that of trees, thereby luring their prey close so as to consume it whole and enrich their reserves of dark power. These beastly things move ponderously, and some are known to exude a foul stench that poisons their victims. Master DeSoto is certain the origin of the walkers, and of the Festering Wood itself, can be traced to the foul doings of necromancers, who he claims are responsible for much of the evil that has befallen our world. He expounded in full to me his theory that the "whole Diablo incident", as he called it, was tied up in their dark arts as well.

Regardless as to whether that is the truth of the matter or not, I felt fortunate that I was unable to find a guide to bring me into the Festering Wood. Upon hearing of what transpires there, I have decided it is far better suited to the adventuring temperament than my own.

ENTRY 25: BARBARIAN

In my journey to catalogue the various denizens, civilizations, and fauna of our world, I have traveled far and wide, but never before have I been struck with such dismay as when standing upon the ramparts of the ancient fortress of Bastion's Keep. I came to see firsthand the barbarians, those near-legendary, immense, relentless, dual-wielding furies of combat dwelling upon their sacred Mount Arreat.

Instead, I stand here looking at a mountain that has been torn asunder by some extraordinary force. The sight, I must confess, is incomprehensible. Yet what I see before me cannot be denied.

What truly happened here? Where are those majestic warriors of old?

Though they were once misunderstood as simple, bloodthirsty invaders, the long and noble history of these proud people is now rightly acknowledged. And therein lies the greater tragedy here, for those of us familiar with the nobility of the barbarians remember too what they call their "vigil", the concept that lay at the very heart of their culture. The

barbarians consider it their sworn duty to protect Mount Arreat and the mysterious object within. They believe that if they fail to uphold their duty to the great mount, or are not given a proper burial upon its slopes, they will be denied a true warrior's death, and their spirits shall roam the land without honor for all eternity.

If there are any barbarians left alive, they must truly be without hope. Perhaps this is the genesis of the rumors of monstrous things reported to resemble the barbarians in size and ferocity, but that are in reality nothing more than unreasoning, inhuman beasts. Could the destruction of not only their home but also their very beliefs have actually brought this magnificent race so low?

ENTRY 32: THE MONK

The last weeks of autumn had settled upon Ivgorod, and the first breath of winter had crept into the air. As night fell and the sun dipped below the horizon, I was all too grateful to take refuge in a tavern. As I entered, I noted a certain tension in the room. Despite the hour, it was not busy, with only scattered, small groups huddled at the tables around the edges of the room. The benches at the center of the room were empty except for one man.

The man seemed ignorant of the cold. He was dressed like a beggar, wearing little more than an orange sheet wound around his body, leaving half of his chest exposed. A garland of large wooden beads hung around his thick neck. His head was completely shaved, with the exception of a wild bushy beard. Then, recognition struck me: upon his forehead he had a tattoo of two red dots, one larger than the other. As any informed student of the peoples and cultures of this world must also realize, this man was one of the Monks of Ivgorod, the secretive and reclusive holy warriors of the country.

I had heard countless fantastic stories about the monks, tales that were surely the beneficiary of significant embellishment. The monks' skin, the accounts said, was as hard as iron, impenetrable by the blade of any sword or by the point of any arrow, and their fists could break stone as easily as you or I would snap a twig. Though the unassuming man before me seemed miles away from what I had heard and read of the monks, I approached cautiously, sliding down onto the bench across from him, eager to take his measure. He beckoned me forward with a small wave of his hand.

"Ah, a soul brave enough to sit with me. Come, friend."

Food was placed before me, but I had little hunger for it, focusing instead on recording the details of the monk's life. He told me of his belief in the existence of a thousand and one gods, gods he believed could be found in all things: the fire in the hearth, the water in the river and the air that we breathed. Pretty enough for a story, perhaps. But any reasoned individual must surely, as I did, scoff at such a view of the world as little more than superstition. He went on to describe his intense mental and physical training, his unending quest to hone his mind and body into an instrument of divine justice. Though I do wonder for what need his thousand gods would require a mortal man to implement their will. When I asked him why he did not carry a sword or, indeed, any weapon at all, he simply replied, "My body is my weapon." Then raising his hand and tapping his forehead, he added, "As is my mind."

Most unexpectedly, I would be treated to a display of this mastery.

A group of men approached our table, knocking my book to the floor and shoving me out of the way, producing knives and other weapons as they advanced. They were focused only on the solitary figure of the monk seated across from me. I scrabbled beneath the table, having an inkling of what was to come. I watched as at some unseen signal, they attacked. Without rising from his seat, the monk met the first man's lunging slash, grabbing his wrist and tossing him carelessly over his shoulder, throwing him into a table with a loud crash. The suddenness of the monk's attack momentarily stunned the men, and as they stood there, he rose.

That was when chaos broke out.

The monk was a fluid mass of restrained energy, meeting every attack with hardly a moment's distress. He fought with hands and feet in a way I had never seen before. In my days, I have witnessed my share of drunken bar brawls, but this was something else altogether. The sound of bones crunching with each of his strikes mixed with something I could not quite believe: the monk was laughing as he fought. One by one, he dispatched his foes until only one remained.

That one picked up a chair and hurled it toward the monk. The monk swung his arm forward and struck the incoming projectile, meeting the solid oak of the chair with his closed fist. The wood broke apart, splinters filling the air as the shattered pieces of the stool fell harmlessly to the ground around him.

"You don't fool me, demon," the monk spat. He pulled his arms back to his sides, then extended his hands before him and began to chant. A nimbus of white light appeared around his head, growing larger and more intense until it completely encompassed the monk's body. He roared, and the light blew outward. As it washed over the other man, his skin peeled away, revealing a red-skinned demon beneath and threw the creature through the front doors of the tavern.

The monk hurtled forward, but his individual movements were too fast for my eyes to track. It seemed as though there were seven of him raining blows upon the demon from every side. Staggered, the demon stumbled. The monk grabbed the demon by the neck, grinning as he pulled his free arm back, crackling energy glowing on his open hand. He shoved his palm forward, and when it struck the demon, its body exploded: muscle, skin and bones tore apart, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

I would not have believed it if I had not seen it with my own two eyes. It seems the stories of these peerless warriors might not have been as exaggerated as I first thought.

ENTRY 35: THE DEMON HUNTERS

I have just returned from my travels on the edge of the frozen wasteland known as the Dreadlands, a once-beautiful place forever changed by some great calamity in its history. Now, only ruined cities and bleak landscapes remain, no place for any living thing. I was headed for the village of Bronn for the night, but when I arrived, I found a scene of devastation such as I had never seen before. I should have fled at the first sign of danger, but my curiosity drove me forward. Most of the town's buildings had been burnt to their foundations, and a few charred timbers were the only sign of where they had once stood. Ash choked my lungs. There were bodies strewn everywhere, many dismembered and some even half consumed. The city was abandoned.

Or so I thought.

From the husk of the inn, one of the few buildings still standing, monstrous, gray-skinned creaturesburst forth, shouting in some infernal tongue. They were masses of misshapen flesh, of sinewy muscle made for battle. Helpless, I stood frozen as they drew close. The one in the lead seized me by the front of my cloak and lifted me from the ground, its claws tearing through fabric and skin. Its breath was hot on my face, and I was assaulted by the putrid smell of rotten flesh. Its mouth yawned wide, and I saw rows of sharpened teeth, yellowed and stained with blood. I thought only of the shame that my voice would be silenced, never to illuminate another of the wonders of our world for you, my loyal readers.

A sharp sound whistled by my ear, and a crossbow bolt sprouted from the eye of the beast before me, spraying my face with its burning blood. It howled an inhuman cry of pain and threw me to the ground, grabbing at the quarrel. The other creatures scanned for this unseen attacker, and I was forgotten for the moment. From the ground at their feet, I tore my head around to see where the bolt had come from.

That was when I saw a demon hunter for the first time.

The girl could have been no more than twenty. She emerged from the shadows cast by the setting sun and wasted no time in dispatching the rest of my attackers. Her hands worked twin crossbows, launching a glowing arc of flaming bolts over my head, blanketing the hulking monsters. Every shot found its mark in one of the horned beasts, felling the lot of them. From the corner of my eye, I saw more of the savage brutes sneaking up on her from behind. My voice froze in my throat as I tried to scream a warning. I needn't have worried: she was not unaware. The hunter reached into her belt and rolled a trio of strange metal spheres into their path. The monsters looked down just as the contraptions exploded into light and flame, stunning them. It gave her enough time to round on them, her crossbows dispatching them one by one.

With a last look over the town, apparently satisfied that no danger remained for her, she came forward, shaking her head sadly. There was a look of profound disappointment on her face as she returned the crossbows to her sides, hidden by the folds of her cloak.

"No survivors," she said bitterly.

They call themselves the demon hunters, a group of fanatical warriors sworn to a single purpose: the destruction of the creatures of the Burning Hells. The demon hunters number in the hundreds and make their home in the Dreadlands so that they can live and train without the interference of any nation that would worry over having such a fearsome group camped within its borders (though at any time over half are dispatched across the world like this girl, seeking hellspawn). There is something in all demon hunters that gives them the strength to resist the demonic corruption that would drive lesser men to madness. They hone this power, for their resistance to this taint enables them to use the demons' power as a weapon. But their mission and their power are not all that bind them together.

That night, the girl told me of her life, about how, as a child, the demons had descended upon her town. She had watched as demons destroyed her home, setting her village to the torch. They murdered everyone she knew and stole from her everyone she loved. She should have died with them, but she fled, hiding from the hellspawn for days until she was

found by a demon hunter who saw the strength in her and took her in as one of their own. Each and every demon hunter, she told me, has a story like this.

They are the survivors, and they are searching for vengeance.

ENTRY 39: THE UNBURIED

Something is dreadfully wrong. Fear is in the air; I can feel it. I was but days out of Tristram when I saw a screaming ball of flame rip across the sky. Surely enough, soon after witnessing this harbinger of doom, I stumbled upon a badly mangled traveller. He was barely able to spit out the tale of the cursed monstrosity responsible for his broken body as his life drifted away. He called his killer "the unburied".

Months ago, when I wrote of the undead blight upon our land, I thought them the gravest of threats. But they are nothing compared to the new undead creature described to me by this poor fellow.

He was a law officer of sorts, a local guard out looking into the depraved handiwork of a crazed individual, the sort we seem to be seeing more and more of in these dark days. When the guard happened upon a mass grave dug by this sick fool, a massive, horned, disgusting behemoth was digging itself out. The dying traveller described this loathsome beast – or, as he termed it, the unburied – as being comprised of bloated parts from many fetid, rotting corpses, with a multitude of disfigured heads and slobbering fanged mouths. He was fortunate that day, but when he returned with several men to help him deal with the creature, they found to their horror that the undead spawn was too much for even their combined efforts. They fought valiantly to the last man, sacrificing themselves to keep the beast from rampaging across the countryside and taking who knows how many innocent lives. He was the last survivor, and before he passed on, he proudly told me that they were successful in eradicating the foul unburied creature. Being born out of pits of human misery, these beings feed on human suffering. Wherever bodies are dumped together

unceremoniously, the unburied may rise. I cannot help but wonder if this be some sort of cosmic justice for our inhumanity to our fellow man. But what is the catalyst? What animates these things? What makes them so horrendously different from the run-of-the-mill zombies or "normal" skeletal undead?

Some days I truly feel that the end of humanity must be at hand. Certainly our world is home to assorted disturbing and unsettling creatures, but every dawn seems to bring news of more wretchedness we must endure as a people. The darkness is coming, my friends: mark my words.

ENTRY 41: ARCHIVIST

In my writings, I have recounted stories of the barbarians and their endless battles with the demons of the frozen north, and devoted pages to the wizards of Caldeum who harness the primal forces of reality. But the might of these heroes is nothing compared to the power of the archivists of Westmarch. These brave souls wade into battle wielding tome and quill, armored not in ensorcelled plate or links of chain, but in the knowledge of generations past. These archivists fight not only for our future, but for our past as well.

I first encountered an archivist in the ruins of the great city of Travincal. While exploring one of the long-abandoned temples, I was drawn by the flickering of faint torchlight through a distant doorway, and then, as I crept nearer, by the sound of a voice. There was a feeling in the air of danger near at hand, an electricity that made the hairs on my neck rise. I inched forward, breath caught in my throat, grateful for the safety of the hallway's long shadows. Then I saw him.

He was surrounded, the looming shapes of his foes bearing down upon him. His hair was unkempt and frazzled, his calloused hands cut and stained. But he had an air of supreme confidence, of a submerged violence that threatened to explode into being. He leapt forward, his hands grabbing for the leather bindings of his nearest enemy. The archivist's

eyes searched for an opening, a weakness. His hands wrenched suddenly about his adversary and a sickening crack pierced the still air. Its spine broken, the book lay unmoving in the archivist's now gentle grip. As he lifted its lifeless form into the dim light, the pages of the ancient tome fell open, the secrets of the text laid bare. I remember the words he read, the religious fervor of his voice: "Here begins the first chronicle of the life of holy Akarat, prophet of Zakarum...." And on the shelves that stood all around him, tome after tome waited. I have the utmost respect for the archivists, these warriors of myth and legend. We know their names: Alimet Two Quills, master of illumination with both left and right hand; Morienne the Scrivener, a midwife whose poetry stole the hearts of kings and brought tyrants to tears; and Salazar Cid, the Master Transcriber of Gea Kul, whose bombastic penmanship is known in all the lands of the Twin Seas and beyond. But these are only a chosen few. The members of their honored fraternity are many, and their numbers grow every day. In the dark days that I fear are yet to come, much will be decided by sword and axe, with steel and spell, but I believe that in scroll and tome our survival lies.

ENTRY 42: MARKED BY CULTISTS

I knew the cultists had found me when I saw the bloody, curved knife stabbed violently into my door this morning. I have spent months trying to ease the fevered imaginings that have tormented me since that encounter a scant few months past, but to no avail. And now they know who I am.

There is an absolute and oppressive darkness to be found only in the deep wilderness at night. Thus, when I saw the distant light of fire while making my way through the thick Tristram forest, I welcomed the company of fellow travelers. As I approached, however, something even darker than the unlit forest crept over me. So horrendous was this feeling that I thought to turn away until the sound of chanting reached my ears and drew me onward. I thank whatever gods blessed me with the presence of mind to stop short of entering that unholy place whence the sound originated. Instead, I sought out a well-

hidden vantage point from which I could look upon the frigid clearing that seemed violently torn from the depths of the forest.

That was when I first saw them, the dark cultists, arrayed in a circle. Their torches lit the macabre proceedings in a pallid light that danced over their garish rune-covered robes. I had heard tales of these hooded cultists and their depraved rituals, and I must admit to some curiosity upon seeing them. As their chanting droned on, I thought to make my escape lest they see me, but my attention was riveted by a pale, vacant-eyed supplicant being led forward. I do not know if he was of limited mental capacity, lost in religious mania, or simply drugged, but he was definitely not sound of mind as he knelt in the center of the thrumming circle.

The chanting stilled as the leader, face shadowed by a heavily gilded hood, stepped forward and began to intone a ritual in some indecipherable tongue. A large, thickly muscled and leather-masked cultist draped a black, eyeless hood over the victim's head before pulling a foot-long spike from his sash. My mind searched for any possible use for this cursed nail when I noticed the immense stygian hammer grasped in his other hand. With one swift motion, he raised it above his head and drove the spike into the supplicant's back with fierce intensity. I almost screamed... but the victim made no sound.

As another spike was readied, I knew I could watch no more. I trembled with the thought of those nails being driven into me should I be caught. I averted my gaze as I heard the revolting squish of another spike sunk into willing flesh. My eyes fell on the robe of the lead cultist. The intricate runes woven into his robe undulated and swirled in sickening movement. As I watched, horrified, I could feel my sanity crumbling away. I began to back away from the wicked tableau, forcing myself to move slowly while my mind screamed for me to flee with abandon. When I could contain myself no longer, I broke into a full run, not caring what sound I made. I ran until I collapsed. And then, as soon as I was able, I staggered to my feet and ran some more.

Not long ago, I wrote of my disappointment that New Tristram lacked the palpable dread its reputation led one to expect. I wish that I had not tempted fate with my quick words. Disappointment is much preferable to stark terror, and terror was what I stumbled into that night.

Since returning home, I have been feverishly researching those demon-enthralled cultists in an effort to ease my mind, to assure myself that I had not actually seen what I had, but every whispered, frightened tale only deepens the chill that has seized me. I do not know which of my actions alerted them, but my worst fears have been realized. I have been marked.

THIS IS THE LAST KNOWN WRITING OF ABD AL-HAZIR. KNOWN FOR HIS COMPILATION OF WEIRD AND WONDERFUL FACTS ABOUT OUR UNIQUE WORLD, HE HAS UNFORTUNATELY BEEN MISSING SINCE LATE LAST YEAR.

DECKARD CAIN'S JOURNAL

29TH DAY OF JESHASAN, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

The events of the past year are unbelievable and have driven me to again write my thoughts. No matter how hard I try, the facts are unavoidable: our King Leoric has gone mad, lashing out in crazed frenzy at the abduction of his son Albrecht, and our steady losses of the ill-advised war against Westmarch, leading to an open revolt among the guards. There is something almost palatable in the air. It feels like...terror.

1ST DAY OF DASNHAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Can the old stories be true—can the tales of the brave Horadrim and the Lords of the Burning Hells be more than a legend, a fairy tale told to me by my mother? I used to thrive on those tales of bravery and heroism. I'd imagine myself; the mysterious Horadrim led by the inscrutable Tal Rasha! I was so proud to be the 'Last of the Horadrim', the one who would travel the world fighting evil wherever it dwelt. Ah, the boundless energy of youth.

Could there be some basis in truth to all these tales? The signs all point to this, but how is someone with my education, my knowledge, to take these tales seriously?

Is there really some dark entity buried beneath our town? If only my ageing mind could remember the tales as vividly as I did in my younger days.

12TH DAY OF DASNHAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

I am a fool. If I had acted sooner, if I had voiced my concerns, they would not be dead. Farnham would not be the drunken sot he now is. Lazarus, supposed Archbishop of Light, has led a group of villagers to their horrific end under the guise of searching for the king's missing son. Is he the architect of the evil that has befallen the town, or simply an unwitting pawn?

The nights are long and as I sit and listen to the hellish drones emanating from the cathedral, I begin to see my path clearly before me. I shall return to the texts. There must be an answer, a way to defeat this evil that torments us.

20TH DAY OF DASNHAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Each new terror sends more townspeople fleeing. There are only a few of us left now. Griswold. Pepin. Ogden. Farnham, the unfortunate Wirt, and of course, the fair Gillian. There is someone else however, someone who has come while others flee. I am not sure what to make of this Adria, who openly calls herself witch. She has access to all manner of arcane knowledge that even I do not. Why has she come here now, at this heinous time? I feel there is something amiss about her.

27TH DAY OF DASNHAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Every dawn seems to bring more adventurers into our midst. But none who can yet be called hero. I hide each time and continue scouring the old texts for answers. If only I had taken them more seriously, not dismissed them so lightly?

1ST DAY OF RATHAM, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Finally one of our adventurers seems to stand out from the rest. Though a man of few words he radiates a calm and focus that unnerve the others, who are only interested in pillaging and looting. I feel I have come to know this hero, this wanderer. I have revealed my history and shared my knowledge with him. I hope it is enough.

21ST DAY OF RATHAM, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

I have suspected for a time now the true nature of the evil that is at the heart of our troubles, but it was too horrible to admit the truth of it. But the time for denial is past: it is the Dark Lord of Terror, Diablo himself, who plagues us.

The vile staff of Lazarus was brought to me today, further confirming my suspicions. There is no longer any doubt that he is the one who kidnapped Albrecht and perhaps even freed Diablo from his ancient prison. Who knows what further treachery he has planned? Luckily, I suspect Lazarus has not long to live if our champion has anything to say on it.

6TH DAY OF ESUNAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

I dreamt of the death wail of a small child tonight. It tore up from the depths, shattering the windows of the decrepit cathedral. As I started awake, it became apparent that it was actually the shriek of Diablo's tortured end. Unable to return to my sleep after such an unsettling cry I ventured outdoors to await the warrior's return. He finally emerged, covered in blood - much his own, much his enemies'. I am greatly relieved he survived the ordeal and these horrible events are now in our past. But my mind is troubled, for could this not have been avoided if I had not dismissed my legacy so lightly?

18TH DAY OF ESUNAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

I have never seen Tristram bursting with so much joy in the weeks since Diablo's defeat. The town's quiet, brooding hero which I am proud to call friend, has humbly endured these celebrations. Yet it seems clear to me the scars he gained beneath the church run deeper than those upon his skin and may have changed him forever. I have offered counsel, but he remains distant. Time, perhaps, is the only thing that may heal him.

20TH DAY OF ESUNAR, 1265 ANNO KEHJISTANI

How could I have been so blind? I believed my friend's melancholy to be a natural reaction of the horrors he lived. How could I not have seen that he carried within him the very being of Diablo? After brooding for weeks, he finally slipped away in the night. Perhaps he had gone to "the east" that he so often woke screaming about in the days following his victory over the Lord of Terror.

Shortly after he left us, legions of foul demons attacked and burned our town to its foundations. None of the townspeople were spared, and not even the women or children were allowed the peace of the grave. Instead, all were reanimated in grisly undeath. And Griswold, who had so faithfully armored the one I had called friend, suffered perhaps the worst fate of all, being corrupted into a slavering demonic beast thirsting after human flesh.

This is no simple madness. It can be nothing less than possession by the Lord of Terror himself. The fool, he thought he could contain Diablo's evil. His reckless overconfidence has proven costly to us all.

I sit now, caged, amongst the screams and the hellfire, as I await my own end.

2ND DAY OF KATHON, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Although I had long given up hope and surrendered to my inevitable fate, the impossible happened today. I was rescued. Heroes have come to Khanduras to combat the corruption of the man I've come to call the Dark Wanderer has brought upon these lands. He had long since departed on some unknown mission, but they could not follow until they defeated the vile demoness, Andariel, who barred the only passage east. I have decided to join them, in the hopes my knowledge of the ancient ways might be of some help.

28TH DAY OF KATHON, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Our sense of relief is overwhelming now that our passage through the desert is finally over and we have arrived in Lut Gholein. Though I tell no one, Diablo's terror has left its mark upon me as well. I wake in the night, suffering unholy visions of the destruction visited upon my home, the slaughter of the helpless villagers, and the echoes of dark acts perpetrated beneath the earth. I hope that these will pass in time, but I fear I will never escape them.

I spoke with the people of the town for a clue to the whereabouts of my former friend, but information is scarce. We have learned that he does not travel alone: he has a companion named Marius. I can only wonder what part he plays in all of this.

11TH DAY OF SOLMANETH, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

We are too late. My companions followed the trail of the Dark Wanderer to the tomb of Tal Rasha, only to be confronted by the demon Duriel. Baal's Soulstone was nowhere to be found. We can assume that Baal is free once again, and that he and the Wanderer have departed for Travincal to free their brother, Mephisto. This must not be allowed to happen.

1ST DAY OF MONTAH, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Today I have seen what has become of the man who once risked everything to save us from the Lord of Terror. It was here in the jungles outside Kurast that we caught our first fleeting glimpse of the Dark Wanderer. It saddens me to think that even as steadfast and noble a hero as he has proven insignificant beneath the corrupting influence of the Lord of Terror. I weep for what he once was, and yet I curse him for his arrogance that has led him to this path, sowing pain and death across the world.

Mephisto's resurrection in this world was brief; my companions have seen to that. They fought through horrors I can scarcely imagine to defeat him and reclaim his Soulstone. They also brought back the devastating news that the Wanderer was no more. All traces of humanity had been eradicated; he has completely been overtaken by Diablo in mind, body, and spirit. Fortunately they have succeeded in driving him back to his fiery home, and they tell me they mean to assault the Burning Hells in order to put an end to his existence once and for all. I can only wish them luck.

4TH DAY OF OSTARA, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

Diablo is dead. I have long desired to hear those words, but now that they come, I feel little joy. News has reached us of a demonic army marching upon Arreat. This is Baal's doing, no doubt. We depart for the north with the tide.

Still, we must count our blessings: the Soulstones of Mephisto and Diablo have been destroyed in the Hellforge and they will trouble us no further. Only one remains.

2ND DAY OF NAVAN, 1266 ANNO KEHJISTANI

The cold of the northern mountains chills me to my old and weary bones. Baal's army holds the mountain passes from our haven in Harrogath all the way to the summit. The honor, strength, and dedication of my companions never cease to amaze me. They are even now braving the demons and snow to reach Baal himself. Rumors of betrayal swirl through the town. This time, we must not be too late.

10th day of Navan, 1266 Anno Kehjistani

It seems we are cursed. Even in victory, we face defeat. Although the heroes defeated Baal, the angel Tyrael has delivered grave news. An object of great power he calls the Worldstone was held in secret at the mountain's summit, and it has been corrupted by Baal. He believes the only option open to him is to destroy it. I know too little of this Worldstone and what powers it may hold to guess what might come of this, but I fear our actions may scar the world in ways we cannot know. I pray Tyrael is making the right choice.

DIABLO I TOMES

1. DARK EXILE

"So it came to be that there was a great revolution within the Burning Hells known as the Dark Exile. The Lesser Evils overthrew the three Prime Evils and banished their spirit forms to the mortal realm. The Demons Belial (the Lord of Lies) and Azmodan (the Lord of Sin) fought to claim rulership of Hell during the absence of the Three Brothers. All of Hell polarized between the factions of Belial and Azmodan while the forces of the High Heavens continually battered upon the very gates of Hell."

2. GREAT CONFLICT

"Take heed and bear witness to the truths that lie herein, for they are the last legacy of the Horadrim. There is a war that rages on even now, beyond the fields that we know - between the Utopian Kingdoms of the High Heavens and the Chaotic Pits of the Burning Hells. This war is known as the Great Conflict, and it has raged and burned longer than any of the stars in the sky. Neither side ever gains sway for long as the forces of Light and Darkness constantly vie for control over all creation."

3. THE REALMS BEYOND

"All praises to Diablo - Lord of Terror and Survivor of the Dark Exile. When he awakened from his long slumber, my Lord and Master spoke to me of secrets that few mortals know. He told me the Kingdoms of the High Heavens and the Pits of the Burning Hells engage in an eternal war. He revealed the powers that have brought this discord to the realms of Man. My Lord and Master has named the battle for this world and all who exist here the Sin War."

4. BOOK OF BLOOD

...and so, locked beyond the gateway of blood, and past the hall of fires, Valor awaits for the hero of light to awaken...

5. MYTHICAL BOOK

"Beyond the hall of heroes lies the Chamber of Bone. Eternal death awaits any who would seek to steal the treasures secured within this room. So speaks the Lord of Terror, and so it is written."

6. BOOK OF THE BLIND

"I can see what you see not.
Vision milky, then eyes rot.
When you turn they will be gone,
Whispering their hidden song.
Then you see what cannot be,
Shadows move where light should be.
Out of darkness, out of mind,
Cast down into the Halls of the Blind."

7. SIN WAR

"Many Demons traveled to the mortal realm in search of the Three Brothers. These Demons were followed to the mortal plane by Angels who hunted them throughout the vast cities of the East. The Angels allied themselves with a secretive order of mortal Magi named the Horadrim, who quickly became adept at hunting Demons. They also made many dark enemies in the underworlds."

8. Tale of the Three

"Glory and approbation to Diablo, Lord of Terror and Leader of the Three. My Lord spoke to me of his two brothers, Mephisto and Baal, who were banished to this world long ago. My Lord wishes to bide his time and harness his awesome power so that he may free his captive brothers from their tombs beneath the sands of the East. Once my Lord releases his brothers, The Sin War will once again know the fury of the Three."

9. Wages of Sin are War

"Take heed and bear witness to the truths that lie herein, for they are the last legacy of the Horadrim. When the eternal conflict between the High Heavens and the Burning Hells falls upon mortal soil, it is called the Sin War. Angels and Demons walk amongst humanity in disguise, fighting in secret, away from the prying eyes of mortals. Some daring, powerful mortals have even allied themselves with either side, and helped to dictate the course of the Sin War."

10.Binding of the Three

"So it came to be that the Three Prime Evils were banished in spirit form to the mortal realm and after sowing chaos across the East for decades, they were hunted down by the cursed Order of the mortal Horadrim. The Horadrim used artifacts called Soulstones to contain the essence of Mephisto, the Lord of Hatred and his brother Baal, the Lord of Destruction. The youngest brother - Diablo, the Lord of Terror - escaped to the West.

11. Tale of the Horadrim

"Take heed and bear witness to the truths that lie herein, for they are the last legacy of the Horadrim.

Nearly three hundred years ago, it came to be known that the three Prime Evils of the Burning Hells had mysteriously come to our world. The Three Brothers ravaged the lands of the East for decades, while humanity was left trembling in their wake. Our order - the Horadrim - was founded by a group of secretive Magi to hunt down and capture the three Evils once and for all.

The original Horadrim captured two of the Three within powerful artifacts known as Soulstones and buried them deep beneath the desolate Eastern sands. The third Evil escaped capture and fled to the West with many of the Horadrim in pursuit. The third Evil - known as Diablo, the Lord of Terror - was eventually captured, his essence set in a Soulstone and buried within this Labyrinth.

Be warned that the Soulstone must be kept from discovery by those not of the Faith. If Diablo were to be released, he would seek a body that is easily controlled as he would be very weak - perhaps that of an old man or a child."

12. The Black King

"Hail and sacrifice to Diablo, Lord of Terror and Destroyer of Souls. When I awoke my Master from his sleep, he attempted to posses a mortal's form. Diablo attempted to claim the body of King Leoric, but my Master was too weak from his imprisonment. My Lord required a simple and innocent anchor to this world, and so found the boy Albrecht perfect for the task. While the good King Leoric was left maddened by Diablo's unsuccessful possession, I kidnapped his son, Albrecht, and brought him before my Master. I now await Diablo's call and pray that I will be rewarded when he at last emerges as the Lord of this world."

13. STEEL TOME

"The armories of Hell are home to the Warlord of Blood.
In his wake lay the mutilated bodies of thousands.
Angels and man alike have been cut down to
fulfill his endless sacrifices to the dark ones
who scream for one thing - blood."

DIABLO II TOMES

1. MOLDY TOME

"...And so it came to pass that the Countess, who once bathed in the rejuvenating blood of a hundred virgins, was buried alive... And her castle in which so many cruel deeds took place fell rapidly into ruin. Rising over the buried dungeons in that god-forsaken wilderness, a solitary tower, like some monument to Evil, is all that remains.

The Countess' fortune was believed to be divided among the clergy, although some say that more remains unfound, still buried alongside the rotting skulls that bear mute witness to the inhumanity of the human creature."

2. HORAZON'S JOURNAL

"Seekers of the Tomb of Tal Rasha will find it through the Portal. But know that the glowing glyphs recorded here in my Arcane Sanctuary are the signs of the six False Tombs. The missing Seventh Sign marks the Tomb of Tal Rasha... Of the Horadrim he might be called the foremost.

It was a shining - but brief - moment for the Mage Clans when they set aside their differences and worked together against the common enemy. The Horadrim relentlessly pursued the Three across the desolate Empires of the East, and even into the uncharted lands of the West, leaving the Archangel Tyrael's hands unblemished.

Presuming the Three to be vanquished, the Horadrim's unstable fellowship began to dissipate. Abandoning their sacred charge to safeguard the three Soulstones, the disparate Mage Clans began to squabble amongst each other over petty differences.

Their conflicts not only dissolved their brotherhood, but strengthened the Evils which they had buried beneath the cold earth."

DIABLO III TOMES

ACT I

1. A PRISONER'S JOURNAL

13th day of Lunasadh, 1263, Anno Kehjistani, The jailers burned runes into my flesh. They say all the torture and dark magic will turn us into demonic slaves for King Leoric. What foolish lies!

17th day of Lunasadh, Pain is terrible...I can't think...I'm so hungrrry.

20th day of Lunasadh, MMMmmMMMASTter I HunnGEr MASTER FeEEED ME.

~A Wretched Prisoner

2. A SUMMONER'S JOURNAL

Maghda is a fool. I will raise an army of souls from these primitives and chain them to my invincible will.

Yes, with these heathens at my command, the kingdoms of the world shall bow to the might of...The Lord of Goats!

I may have to work on the title a bit more.

~Dark Cultist

3. ADENAH'S JOTTINGS

These cowardly farmers have been leaving the fields for days now, but I'm not about to follow them. My home is here, and a few angry goatmen won't change that.

~Adenah the Curio Vendor

4. Adria's Journal

Aidan came to me last night. I suspected what was lurking within his troubled heart. I consoled him as best I could. Regardless, wherever he's headed, Hell will surely follow in his wake. The shadows close in on Tristram once again. But, like Aidan, I'll be gone before they fall.

5. Cain's Old Journal

Part I

I can no longer deny the true nature of the evil that rises from the depths of the cathedral. It is almost too horrible to admit the truth of it. It is the dark Lord of Terror, Diablo himself, who plagues us.

Part II

The vile staff of Lazarus was brought to me today, confirming my suspicions. There is no longer any doubt that Lazarus kidnapped Albrecht and perhaps even freed Diablo from his ancient prison. Who knows what further treachery he has planned?

6. Command from Cultist Grand Inquisitor

I need more bodies! You think my summoners can just conjure up a demon whenever it pleases them? We must have blood — fresh blood, mind you — and human flesh to bolster our magic. I will be expecting a reply from you shortly.

~Grand Inquisitor

7. CULTIST PAGES

Page I

Word has come that Adria has fallen, slain by the nephalem. Perhaps she has reunited with Maghda now, somewhere... There are few of us left who remember the power they once wielded--and the promises they made.

Page II

One thing that is still clear to me--whatever is left of Adria belongs to us. It is vital that we recover her possessions before anyone else can reach them. As soon as the nephalem is gone, we shall make our move.

Page III

It took time, but we have scoured every part of the Blood Marsh. We found most of what we expected, aside from Adria's journals. Perhaps it is fitting that her innermost thoughts will remain a mystery to us.

Page IV

There is much that I do not understand within Adria's runes and spellbooks, though I have pored over their every page. I never realized how far her knowledge of magic extended beyond my own. This will be a trying task.

Page V

After hours of study, I grew weary of the pointless frustration and tossed Adria's books aside. As I cursed to myself, I became aware of a faint whispering in the shadows... Something had heard my anguish, and it responded.

Page VI

I begged the voices in the shadows for a window into Adria's memories. If I learn from her example, I may find a way forward for those of us who remain loyal. The nephalem destroyed our plans, but there could still be a chance...

Page VII

The shadows have answered me. Old Tristram will return to what it once was--but only for a short time. I have until then to uncover the rest of the witch's secrets.

8. Deckard Cain's Journal

Part I

We have come at last to Tristram's old Cathedral. This is where Diablo, Lord of Terror, first corrupted mankind. This is where I may finally find the answers I seek. Leah worries after my safety, but I believe information vital to defeating the last lords of the Burning Hells can be found here.

Part II

I wish that Leah could live a different life--a more normal life--but, alas, such is not her fate. When I pass, there is none but her to continue my work, and the future of this world hangs in the balance.

9. Despina's Journal

Praise the powers that be! Griswold, bless his dear heart, risked everything to bring that dear boy home from the cathedral. Though he is troubled and moody now, I am certain it will pass and he will once again be the sweet Wirt we all love.

10. Farmer's Journal

I'm not quite sure what all the fuss is about. Few farmers turn up dead, and everyone goes running for the hills. I've lived off these lands for twenty years, and I have not seen any bloodthirsty monsters running about. No reason I should leave a perfectly good harvest.

~Misguided Farmer

11. Gillian's Diary

Part I

"Ogden and his wife have offered to let me and Grandmother continue to stay with them. I think we will now that the troubles are over.

I am still tormented by horrific nightmares. I keep hoping they will fade, but they seem to be getting stronger.

-Gillian-"

Part II

"To think I was once afraid of Adria. She is going to take me to Caldeum! I never thought to see it with my own eyes...

Thought it saddens me to leave Ogden and his wife, Adria assures me that she will find a cure for my nightmares.

-Gillian-"

12. Gravedigger's Log

"When King Leoric came to court, he brought many nobles with him. And nobles, oddly enough, want noble crypts. So I showed up with my shovel, thinking to make an easy profit by digging a few holes. Ha! There's no stopping their demands around here! Now I eat, sleep and breathe dirt, it seems..."

~Darris the Gravedigger

13. Hermit's Ravings

"I used to be one of them. Ordinary. Untouched. Until her voice came to me. Then I knew how I must serve. I must kill the one who threatens my mistress and the dark power that created her. I have been chosen!"

14. KHAZRA HEADS WANTED

"The local Khazra tribes have become a serious threat. They attack caravans and are moving into areas where they haven't been seen before. We need you to take care of this problem for us. We'll pay twenty-five gold pieces for every Khazra head you bring back."

~New Tristram Official

15. KINGSPORT BILL

"Wanted: one relic, scarlet, roughly the size of a man's fist.

It was stolen two months past during a deplorable theft from the Merchants Guild Bank. Those apprehended were not in possession of the item. The relic is greatly missed by its rightful owner, who offers a reward for its safe return."

16. LACHDANAN'S SCROLL

Part I

"My name is Lachdanan, and I am cursed. Once the captain of King Leoric's army, I lived only to honor my land and my king. No man has a greater love for his king than I had for mine, even as I drove my blade through his dark and corrupted heart."

Part II

"It was Lazarus - of that I am certain. He alone had the king's ear and whispered dark and evil magics into it, instilling the notion of an imminent attack by Westmarch. Afraid to speak against the archbishop, the councilors nodded their empty heads in agreement and sent us off to die."

Part III

"When we returned from our horrific defeat in Westmarch, my beloved king lost all pretense of sanity. He seethed with rage, spitting curses upon us as traitors. With great sorrow, I ran him through."

Part IV

"I will forever live in anguish for my last attempt to honor my king. As we lay him to rest in his burial chamber, he manifested as a hideous skeletal demon. Gorash and my other knights were overcome at once, but I fought on."

Part V

"And now I wander, cursed by my once-beloved king. Evil gnaws at my bones, and I cannot risk putting my beloved Tristram in danger should I fail to contain that which tears at me. I must venture down into the labyrinth to die alone."

17. LAZARUS'S GRIMOIRE

"The time of my lord's true awakening is at hand. That fool Leoric was only able to resist him because he did not yet possess his full power. With the queen dispatched as a traitor, I may now devote myself fully to preparing the boy for the presence of my master..."

18. LEAH'S TRISTRAM JOURNAL

Part I

"We've been under siege for six days now. Uncle Deckard is still missing. Captain Rumford and the others are losing hope. I tell them not to lose faith... but if help doesn't arrive soon..."

Part II

"A miracle has happened! A hero, like one out of Uncle Deckard's tales, appeared and saved us! I know in my heart that my uncle still lives and I pray that the hero will bring him home safely."

Part III

"Uncle Deckard's home--rescued from the clutches of the Skeleton King! I'm so glad. But the Skeleton King? I thought he was a folktale. The idea of mad King Leoric returning to torture this place... Hasn't Tristram suffered enough?"

Part IV

"I can hardly believe it, but the falling star... is a man! When Uncle Deckard realized this, he was crushed. I know he was hoping for something more... miraculous."

Part V

"Uncle Deckard believes the key to unlocking the Stranger's memory is reassembling his sword. I wish I could say this was another of Uncle's crazy theories, but I can't deny that these ominous events are starting to really scare me."

Part VI

"When we retrieved the Stranger's second sword piece, Maghda found us. She's always on our heels. Who is she? She claims to know my mother, but how could that be? Regardless, we must beat her to Wortham and the final piece of the sword."

Part VII

"Uncle Deckard is gone forever. I remember the wonderful times we had together, always off on another crazy quest. What will I do without him? He believed the Stranger was an angel, but he is only a man. I always knew they were just stories. Uncle Deckard died for those stories."

19. LEORIC'S JOURNAL

Part I

"We have just arrived in Tristram, and I must say I'm a bit dismayed. This place is a backwater filled with serfs and an ancient, broken-down monastery, hardly fit for the king of Khanduras! I cannot fathom why Lazarus was so intent on this becoming our new seat of power."

Part II

"A fetid, pallid malaise has fallen over the manor we now call home. Young Albrecht seems to be enjoying himself in our new home, however. Perhaps I am simply suffering from an imbalance of humors brought on by the recent change of clime."

Part III

"I am convinced that some malevolent being is attempting to wrest control of my thoughts away from me. Voices direct me to horrendous acts, and there are times when I seem unable to control my body. Lazarus knows; this is certain. He looks at me strangely when he thinks me otherwise disposed."

Part IV

"Though my council begs me to reconsider, I will continue with the executions of those I find guilty of plotting against the kingdom. Perhaps they fear my eye will fall on them and discover their heinous, treasonous plans as well. Lazarus is the only one I can still trust."

Part V

"I have finally rid myself of the dark influence seeking to subdue me, and now I see things as they truly are. This conspiracy among the insolent townsfolk to weaken me by stealing Albrecht away will not stand! Perhaps the heads of their women and children on pikes will bring them clarity..."

20. Lost Journal

"I had heard the rumors, but I thought them just fancies of bored women... until I saw them dragging people through the streets today. Our own citizens! Has the world gone mad?!"

21. Mira's Letter to Haedrig

"My dearest Haedrig,

Do not feel despair, my love. You did everything you could. Our time together meant more than words can say, but in the end, fate is a cruel mistress. Your strength is needed to end the horrors that beset this world. My final wish is that you find your path.

Love always,

Mira"

22. New Tristram

"For many years, villagers were too afraid to settle near the ruins of the cursed town Tristram. But as time went by, adventurers arrived to loot the old cathedral, and their business was profitable enough that New Tristram sprang up to accommodate them. Fewer travelers visit now, though, and the town is mostly populated by craftsmen and farmers."

~Deckard Cain

23. Notes of Urik the Seer

Part I

"Long I have labored to master the dark arts. Now I finally reap the rewards, for Maghda has acknowledged me! She promised me a special task that will bring endless glory to the Great One. I can hardly rest until she reveals it on the morrow!"

Part II

"Goatmen! All of my labors were for a bunch of rotten, stinking goatmen! Maghda claims that they will become our most valuable allies and that the task is one that she can entrust to no one but me, but I know my place. I am most bruisingly humbled."

Part III

"Enslaving the goatmen was easier than I anticipated. My magic seemed to reignite the savagery deep within them, and they flocked to me in hordes. A few escaped — those who understood the fate of their people — but they are too weak to counter my spells. The Moon clan attacks at my command!"

24. Old Diary

"There is chaos everywhere, and word in town is that Lachdanan killed the king! If only this is true, perhaps our days and nights of living in terror are behind us now."

25. Old Tristram Journal

"The rumors of torture and worse grow every day. What has happened to Tristram and its king? I once thought Leoric a great man, but it seems I was deceived. We all were. He sends our meager army against Westmarch on the morrow. What will become of us?"

~Villager Despina

26. Orders from Maghda

There is a new piece to the game, a girl named Leah. My spies tell me she is the child of the witch Adria, who is hiding in the deserts of Caldeum. Bring this news to the master at once.

~Maghda

27. Priest's Contemplations

Part I

"One of the men retrieved a strange artifact in his nets. It looked like a hilt of an ancient blade, but I know it must be more. The fisherman argued with me, but I convinced him to leave it in the safety of the chapel. A holy place for a holy relic."

Part II

"When the church of Zakarum sent me here, I assumed that my village would be simple and untroubled. To be honest, I was relieved. Corruption has struck down many a greater man than I, and such a quiet place could've been my salvation. But everything changed when disaster struck the Tristram Cathedral."

28. Queen Asylla's Journal

"Starved of the sun, I no longer know what day it is. I can hear the Warden, my husband, and that dog Lazarus discussing my fate. My life will be over soon, yet I fear more for my poor Albrecht's future in the wake of his father's madness. If only Aidan were here."

~Queen Asylla

29. Reply from Cultist Grand Inquisitor

Of all the abominable stalling! In case it was not clear, I need the sacrifices now. I have heard enough of your idle complaints that the villagers have fled from the Highlands, leaving no one left to sacrifice. You'd best come up with something, or it's your hide we'll be flaying.

~Grand Inquisitor

30. Report from Wortham

Mistress, It is my pleasure to report that I have broken the prisoners from Wortham. Words have flowed from their mouths like blood from a wound! Our summoners can retrieve the weapon at your command, and the enemy shall be none the wiser.

~Dark Cultist

31. Researching the Khazra

"My loutish companions have no curiousity about the Khazra; they are only interested in the bounty on their heads. But I am convinved the Khazra can be communicated with. It is dangerous, to be sure, but it is a risk I am willing to take."

~Belard the Scholar

32. Scabbard of Talic the Defender

"This scabbard is a rare treasure. Its inscription reads, "Talic the Defender," in archaic lettering. He was one of the ancients who guarded Mount Arreat until the shattering of the Worldstone, a true warrior who gave his life to spare the world from the dark fate it has fallen to now."

~Vendel the Armorsmith

33. Scoundrel's Journal

"After much searching, I have found a promising lead. A family near New Tristram has obtained a valuable relic, and poor fools that they are, they haven't the slightest idea what to do with it! I have some idea of what to do with their daughter, though... and through her, I'll get my prize."

34. The Drowned Temple

The Worldstone has been changed. Our children are born weak and suffer short lives. The demon Nereza promised to restore their power but instead turned them into misshapen creatures and sent them to war against us. We may die, but not before she is sent back to the Burning Hells. ~Alaric

35. The Hanging Tree

"The cold ground welcomes the foul bodies of these cruel men. They sought to prolong their lives through forbidden magic at great and cruel cost to others. Their evil fed on itself until it consumed them all and they found themselves at the end of a hangman's rope."

~Tristram Magistrate

36. The Highlands

"Though New Tristram and the fields surrounding it have been resetted over the years, the Highlands remain empty save for the crumbling ruins of Leoric's old outposts. The king built more than one watchtower in his paranoia but now they cannot even ward away goatmen and wild beasts. A tragedy, really.

~Abd al-Hazir

37. The Khazra Massacre

Everyone is dead. Belard, that damned fool, was killed, trying to communicate with the khazra. And then the cultists showed up. As soon as I saw them, I ran. I wanted no part in their dark magic. I heard the screams of my companions, but there was nothing I could do to help.

~Osman the Hunter

38. The Last Stand of the Ancients

Our enemies are legion, but they will not take us without a fight. We must hold them here while the keys to the holy temple are hidden away from their leader, the fiend Nereza. Resolve must not falter, though we will surely die to the last man!

~Edric

39. The Skeleton King

"The Zakarum high priests in Kurast proclaimed Leoric king of Khanduras many years ago. He ruled well until Diablo's influence drove him mad, and the loyal knight Lachdanan was forced to slay him. Afterward, Diablo himself raised Leoric from the dead as the Skeleton King until the monarch's son Aidan vanquished him."

~Deckard Cain

40. Tomb Robber's Journal

We were so sure we could beat whatever traps the ancients had laid for the tomb robbers, but the dead bodies of my friends testify to the folly of our arrogance. I will be dead soon as well. Our greed was our downfall...

~Tomb Robber

41. Torn Letter

Chancellor Eamon, it is of the utmost importance that we secure my manor from the traitorous rabble in Tristram. The caves to the east are too close to my land! They must be blocked — completely obstructed. I believe the archbishop Lazarus has magically bound some arachnids of late. They may serve us well...

~His Majesty, King Leoric

42. Torn Letter's Response

Royal Guard,

With great pain, I must admit that our king is no longer able to separate reason from madness. He orders the caverns to be filled with the archbishop's monstrous creations and will hear nothing else. Perhaps the legendary ancients themselves once dwelled there... but now we must desecrate their ruins.

~Chancellor Eamon

43. Traveler's Journal

"While exploring a cave with hopes of finding hidden treasure, I came upon a most grisly sight - a heap of dead bodies. Unbelieveably, as I was searching them for any items of value, they began to rise! I must tell them of this in New Tristram before it's too late."

~Theren the Traveler

44. Tristram Fields

"The Tristram Fields are fair lands, fertile and temperate. Superstitious farmers kept away from them for quite a while after the fall of Old Tristram, but time has persuaded them to abandon these ridiculous notions and take up the hoe and plow once more. Now they supply crops to both New Tristram and Wortham."

~Abd al-Hazir

45. Villager's Journal

The king has gone mad, executing anyone his paranoid eye falls on! None of us are safe.

~Villager Gordon

46. Wandering Tinker's Diary

We should have known. The farmers left over a fortnight ago, and yet we stayed. Last night, we heard the beasts creeping closer. My husband left to investigate, and I haven't seen him since... All I have left are the things we made together. Hopefully they are of more use to someone else.

~Rina the Tinker

47. Warrior's Rest

Alaric says that our people can survive the coming battle, but I saw the truth in his eyes. Why did he order me to guard the Beacon of Honor? Those shambling things are slaughtering my people in the forest above, and there is nothing I can do to stop it!

~Edric

48. Warriv's Journal

"I return to Khanduras after twenty years, the burden of countless failures and tragedies heaped upon my shoulders. Am I being punished for helping that stranger hunt the Dark Wanderer? I always thought Deckard Cain half a madman, but perhaps...he was right. Perhaps he can banish the shadow hanging over my life."

~Warriv

ACT II

49. A LOVE LETTER

From the pages of Solan, exalted poet of Kehjistan: My love rises out of the oasis like a willow. Let me nourish her like a pool of cool water. Let me wind myself up her curves and hollows like fingers in ivy, and climb her shaded branches to taste of her fruit.

50. A SERVANT'S JOURNAL

My little Hakan has become so cruel...so paranoid in the last few weeks. I hear that he has ordered all of his staff to leave the city, or he will have them thrown from the walls. He cannot possibly mean me. I have cared for him since he was an infant!

~Servant Kohin.

51. AN ABRIDGED HISTORY OF CALDEUM

1. Most commoners know Caldeum by reputation if not direct experience. The trade city has existed for thousands of years, predating even the Mage Clan Wars. Its neutral stance throughout the following centuries saved it from the destruction that visited the nearby city of Viz-jun and life - along with trade - carried on.

2. The trade consortium council has always been the ruling body of Caldeum, but it gained additional strength after the fall of the Vizjerei. The councilmen saw opportunity in the rapidly growing Zakarum faith, and they allowed the fanatics to build their enormous cathedral, Saldencal, within the center of the city.

3. Not content to reign supreme in commerce and religion, the trade consortium council aspired to make Caldeum a nexus of learning as well. It proposed to unite the mage academics in a massive new structure - the Yshari Sanctum - which has remained a beacon of knowledge and advancement ever since.

4. Caldeum changed drastically in recent years when the Kurast nobles all but invaded the city. Soon after, their emperor, Hakan I, joined them and made Caldeum his capital. Though his actions seemed audacious, he managed to bring further peace and prosperity to the city for the duration of his reign.

5. All was well under the new emperor until his untimely death forced the Zakarum priests to find a new heir for Kehjistan's throne. Through a series of elaborate rituals (undoubtedly a spectacle for their superstitious followers), they determined an impoverished infant in the north was Hakan I's spiritual successor.

6. After the Zakarum priests' rituals were complete, they employed a group of reckless mercenaries, the Iron Wolves, to retrieve the child. They dubbed him Hakan II and installed him on the throne despite his scant years. Caldeum has been in decline ever since, and I can see no reprieve in sight.

52. Andariel, the Maiden of Anguish

Andariel was the only female Evil. She aided the Lesser Evils for many years, but eventually she lost faith in their plots. Two decades ago, she chose to help Diablo during his resurgence and seized the Citadel of the Sightless Eye. Ultimately, she perished at the hands of brave heroes.

~Deckard Cain

53. Azmodan, the Lord of Sin

The Valrous manuscript lists Azmodan as the best battlefield commander of all demons, having defeated the angels many times in the Eternal Conflict across Pandemonium and the Prime Evils in the demonic civil war. If the Lord of Sin ever assaults our realm, we truly have much to fear.

~Deckard Cain

54. Baal, the Lord of Destruction

Baal was the most brash and reckless of the Prime Evils. After the Dark Exile, he was contained within the Horadrim Tal Rasha and entombed. Centuries later, Diablo freed Baal, who then corrupted the Worldstone to devastating effect for the Barbarians who lived near Mount Arreat. The heroes killed Baal shortly afterwards.

~Deckard Cain

55. Belial, the Lord of Lies

Belial, Lord of Lies, is the most elusive of the seven Evils and is a master of deceit. It is said that he manipulated Azmodan into revolt against the Prime Evils. This began the Burning Hells' civil war, which ended with the Dark Exile of the Prime Evils to our mortal realm.

~Deckard Cain

56. Blackened Journal

Asheara is a good woman. She has to know that the emperor isn't the same sweet child she brought to Caldeum years ago. She has to act! If Caldeum falls, so do the trade routes, and people will start starving all over the world. We must tear Hakan from his throne!

~Iron Wolf Swordsman

57. CRUMBLING JOURNAL

My mother told me not to join the mages' army. I should have listened. In the morning they're sending the infantry against the Vizjerei. I don't know how we're supposed to survive. Maybe we're not. It's so beautiful here. Maybe if I hid in the trees, they wouldn't notice me.

~Mage Clan Soldier

58. DECEIVERS' ORDERS

Part I

My exemplary servants, Keep the witch alive until she talks. Pain will loose her tongue, but only to a point. Remember what happened with the vizier's assistant...? It was a pleasurable time, I admit, but the man had only incoherent babble and bloody strands of pus spilling from his lips by the end.

Part II

Overwhelm the enemy and seize his/her companions. There is a witch among them and... another... a girl. Bring them to me along with the Black Soulstone. They will be searching for the head of Zoltun Kulle. Scour the oasis for it. Some old sorcery lingers on the skull, and it must be mine.

Part III

Miserable wretches, I have no time for your excuses. Caldeum is on the brink of rebellion, and the enemy is closing in on the archives of Zoltun Kulle. Slaughter him/her and bring me the mad wizard's head and the Black Soulstone, or I shall inflict incomprehensible agony upon the lot of you.

59. Diablo, the Lord of Terror

Diablo was the youngest of the Prime Evils, but I found him the most dangerous, for his power over terror left him incapable of feeling fear. Though he had easily possessed and corrupted many humans, Diablo's essence was finally trapped in a soulstone and banished to the unfathomable Abyss twenty years ago.

~Deckard Cain

60. Duriel, the Lord of Pain

Duriel is the twin of Andariel. I believe that they conspired together to assist Diablo in releasing Mephisto and Baal, though they had both supported the Lesser Evils in the past. The Lord of Pain was found guarding Baal's prison — the tomb of Tal Rasha — when he was slain by heroes.

~Deckard Cain

61. Eirena's Journal

I felt no fear when they sealed the tomb before me, only a sense of peace as my mind drifted away into the darkness. It seems I opened my eyes only seconds later and beheld the chamber in ruins, half-buried in sand. I have left everything behind... Only hope guides me now.

~Eirena

62. Fuad's Journal

Day four: We were crazed with starvation from three days with no food, but that is no excuse for what we have done...

Day seven: I cannot face what I have become...

Day ten: I hunger, but I am patient. Someone will come for me. And then I will feed again.

~Fuad

63. Guard's Orders

Captain of the Guard, you are hereby ordered to send a band of your most loyal men to secure the Khasim Outpost. Control of the city hangs by a thread. The commoners are becoming restless, and it is imperative that we subdue them. Remain vigilant, for these may already be an outsider within our borders, looking to stir up trouble.

~ (Illegible Signature)

64. Hunter's Journal

Part I

We are in agreement. Kulle the renegade must be stopped. He seeks to duplicate the power of the stones and wield it for his own ends. He is obsessed with the powers of Heaven and Hell. Drawing their attention will only bring doom to us all.

Part II

We set out in one week's time into the Desolate Sands to search for Kulle's hidden archives. None of us have any idea what to expect. How far has Kulle's madness driven him? How much power has he accumulated in his mad quest? I can only hope we are not too late...

Part III

We found Kulle's archives. They were strangely empty...at first. But Kulle laid traps everywhere. Each step harder than the next. It was foolish to expect otherwise. Kulle has prepared for many years for someone to come for him. Perhaps we are fools, and yet we must push on.

Part IV

Try as we might, Kulle simply cannot be killed. His cursed body sustains him. He bleeds sand, and his laughter mocks us. There is only one course of action left to us. We will separate his body and his head, and hide the body within the shadow realm.

Part V

We will seal the shadow locks with vials of his blood in the desert under eternal guard. I can only hope that the world does no forget of Kulle's evil, and his blood remains undisturbed beneath the shifting sands.

Part VI

Kulle mocks my every step. I try to shut him out, but his chattering is ceaseless. He takes joy in taunting me. I will not rise to the bait. I will not give in to him. I long for the silence that will come once I secure his head away.

65. Iron Wolf Captain's Journal

Another sunset, and Alcarnus is still safe from the sudden madness that plagues Caldeum. Though we are seeing an influx of hooded pilgrims for some Zakarum holy day, the... demons out there are keeping their distance. I will double the guard at the gate. We must not be unprepared if our luck turns.

~Iron Wolf Captain

66. Kala's Poem

When the desert sands silence their whispers in the night, and the thousand lights of the stars bleed into the darkness, I will find you in the void. My love will pour from me as words pour from my pen.

~Kala

67. Kulle's Journal

Part I

Finally, I have unlocked the secret of the soulstones once given to the Horadrim by Tyrael. An impressive creation, to be sure, but one that I am certain can be duplicated. No, not just duplicated - improved upon. My soulstone will be made to contain the souls of many demons, or even angels!

Part II

I believe with this soulstone I will finally be able to unlock the true power of man. In ancient times, our kind possessed power unmatched in this dreary age. With the soulstone, I will be able to elevate myself to the strength of my ancestors.

Part III

The Black Soulstone will be my greatest work, my legacy, and my gift to humanity. There will be wars to come between man and the creatures of Heaven and Hell. The power housed within my stone is the very thing needed to set mankind free from demons and angels forever.

Part IV

The wards have been triggered. It seems my brothers have finally come looking for me. Damn them! I am not ready. Too much of my power is invested in the stone's creation. I must finish it. The future of mankind depends on it...

68. Larra's Diary

About a week has passed since the cultists found us. Mama told me to hide; I was always good at hiding. No one could ever find me because I would choose the places where no one wanted to look. Then they dragged my parents away... I can still hear them screaming.

69. Leah's Caldeum Journal

Part VIII

Caldeum — everything Uncle Deckard left me leads to this place. It's strange; I first met him here when I was only a child... and now his loss feels heavier than ever. He was right about everything all along... We have to stop Belial before it's too late.

Part IX

The city has many secrets, and I still remember most of them. I can get into Caldeum through the sewers if I avoid the Imperial Guard. While I'm out, my friend has sworn to take down Maghda. It won't bring Uncle Deckard back, but we'll all be relieved when she's gone.

Part X

After all this time, my mother is alive! I couldn't be happier, and yet it's still hard to accept that she never sent word to me or Uncle Deckard. She said that she wanted to keep me safe, but I just wish I'd known... Well, at least I have her now.

Part XI

My mother has been teaching me magic and how to control my power, but I feel like I'm constantly disappointing her. She says that I have a gift, but it doesn't feel that way. Maybe it will improve if I keep practicing. For now, we are getting closer to the Black Soulstone, and that's what really matters.

Part XII

We have the Black Soulstone at last, despite Zoltun Kulle's betrayal. I always knew he couldn't be trusted. Fortunately, we were able to defeat him and retrieve the stone. I learned that my mother had secretly bound the fallen Lords of Hell to it... I just wonder why she didn't tell me.

70. Lyndon's Journal

We have found the key to the ancient device, but I fear that these treasures will cost us our lives. At least my brother and I have made it this far, and we are still alive. Dare we use this machine?

~Lyndo

71. Maghda, Leader of the Coven

When I joined the Coven, it was weak and idle. The leaders were content to do nothing, while the Prime Evils were imprisoned. I convinced another witch to help me poison them, and together we took control. She...left some years later, but I continued, bringing the Coven to glory under Lord Belial.

~Maghda

72. Mephisto, the Lord of Hatred

The evil of Mephisto, Lord of Hatred, was so pervasive that even after he had been defeated and entombed in a soulstone, his demonic essence oozed upwards into Travincal and corrupted the Zakarum priests. Though he fell to the same heroes who killed his brothers, I fear for us should he ever return.

~Deckard Cain

73. Missive to Maghda

Part I

Maghda, this "hero" means to attack you in Alcarnus. If I were you, I would set a trap at the Khasim Outpost, but I am not you. For all I know, you wish to fail me again and force me to kill you. That would grieve me, though somehow...I think I could manage it. - Belial

Part II

Maghda, such sad, sad tales have reached me of your truly abysmal failure to stop the enemy at the Khasim Outpost. But at least the enemy's spy has been found. Once we eliminate her and her allies, this obnoxious little world will fall to me...and perhaps you, if you survive. - Belial

74. Necromancer's Log

Two decades ago, my mentor faced the forces of evil and emerged victorious. I cannot hope to surpass his achievements, but I will try to bring balance to the raging forces that threaten ot tear the world asunder in these days. The spirits are restless near Caldeum, I must quiet them.

75. On the Desolate Sands

Part I

We, the Zakarum, have endeavoured to make Caldeum a city of mercy and salvation, but we have not yet been able to convince the emperors to change the ancient policy of exile. Prisoners convicted of treason are still sent to the Desolate Sands to die with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

~Lysra the Zakarum Archivist

Part II

In thousands of years of records, I cannot find a single account of a prisoner surviving exile to the Desolate Sands. The wastes are littered with bones that have been picked dry by the endlessly circling blood hawks or desperate lacuni. Those who die there meet their end without the sanctity of the Light.

~Lysra the Zakarum Archivist

Part III

The Zakarum scholar Brast wrote that the Desolate Sands were created after a mage-clan battle sent out explosive energies that devastated the entire area. But he doesn't account for the enormous skeletons... No one has ever identified them. Were they a lost race of giant beasts? Demons? Mythical dragons? We may never know.

~Lysra the Zakarum Archivist

76. POLTAHR'S NOTES

I never thought I'd become a treasure hunter, but I also never thought my family's fortunes would sink so low. Yesterday I heard a nobleman asking about The Rygnar Idol — an artifact that belonged to the great mage Zoltun Kulle. If I can retrieve it, my family will never go hungry again.

~Poltahr

77. Proclamation from the Imperial Guard

Attention, Subjects of Emperor Hakan II:

A trespasser has been sighted in the city sewers. Witnesses describe the suspect as a young woman in a crimson tunic. Reports indicate that she arrived in Caldeum recently along with a party of suspicious travelers. Any information leading to her immediate capture will be handsomely rewarded by His Eminence.

78. The Chamber of Faces

The vault door is sealed by magic means. The stone faces upon the ground seem to have some reaction to our presence. We would investigate further, but our intrusion has woken something in these halls. We should not linger.

~Iron Wolf Jarulf

79. The Dahlgur Oasis

Three centuries ago, a much smaller Caldeum depended upon small wells for its water. Then came the mysterious Dahlgur, offering Caldeum an oasis of unparalleled splendor located in an area previously thought to be desert, asking only that his name be permanently affixed to the land. Then, he vanished into the wastes.

~Abd al-Hazir

80. The Desert Aqueducts

Part I

The Caldeum aqueducts were created by order of the trade consortium council after the Dahlgur Oasis was discovered three centuries ago. Though Caldeum had been prosperous for many years, a reliable source of water allowed the city to grow even further. Luxurious public fountains were built to provide safe drinking water for everyone.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part II

In recent days, the aqueducts have become dilapidated and infested with vermin. The Imperial Guard has done nothing, proclaiming that the aqueducts were in tolerable condition. But I have seen them with my own eyes, and I know the truth. Many wealthy families, including myself, now prefer well water for our homes.

~Abd al-Hazir

81. The Feared Hero

We camp, lying in wait for a hero of incredible prowess. My gut churns with the suspicions that we are simply fodder. I have heard tales of this hero wading through our ranks, slaughtering us as if we were children. I will not sleep again tonight, I fear.

~Dark Cultist

82. The Imperial Guard's Orders

The enemy has destroyed Alcarnus and most of the cultists. The master commands us to capture more slaves immediately. Go to the oasis and abduct the villagers. Kill any who resist. That way, we shall both gain allies and destroy enemies.

~Captain of the Imperial Guard

83. The Last Will of Khan Dakab

My life has been long. I have gathered much wealth around me. But gold has brought me nothing but pain, and I will not let the curse of my wealth fall on my family. This room shall hold my treasure for all eternity; none shall divine its secrets...

~Khan Dakab

84. The Legend of Zei the Trickster

The people of Xiansai worship fifty-nine gods, but few are more revered than Zei, the exiled trickster god who travels the face of the world, disguised as a humble merchant. Tales of his adventures range from ingenious thefts and practical jokes to more... lurid exploits, none of which I am comfortable recording here.

~Abd al-Hazir

85. The Musings of Sardar

The fools of the Trade Consortium are clueless that I siphon the public funds from their coffers. I will continue to hide my plunder here, where none can find it. One day soon I will claim my treasure and flee this desert hell for the greener pastures of the west.

~Caliphate Sardar

86. The Promises of Fezuul al-Kazaar

Fezuul al-Kazaar promised that he would lead his followers from sinful Caldeum to a lily-strewn paradise at the heart of the desert and that the journey would transform them beyond all recognition. Judging by the condition of the gnawed corpses found weeks later, Fezuul kept at least one of his promises.

~Abd al-Hazir

87. The Seven Lords of Hell

It is with some reluctance that I write on the seven Lords of Hell, for they are the greatest of the demons, and even whispering their names seems to poison the air around me. They are divided into the Lesser Evils (Belial, Azmodan, Duriel, and Andariel) and the Prime Evils (Mephisto, Baal, and Diablo).

~Deckard Cain

88. Zoltun Kulle

Murderer. Torturer. Monster. These were the titles bestowed upon Zoltun Kulle by the Horadrim. Though it cost them dearly, they killed the wizard for his crimes against nature and sealed his broken corpse within a shadow realm. It seems they were afraid he might return.

ACT III

89. BATTLEFIELD REPORTS

The men are losing hope. The demons' numbers seem endless. They come at all times, day or night, and no amount of casualties we inflict slows their advance. We need reinforcements. We need help.

~Guard Kelvan

90. BLOODSTAINED LETTER

My dearest Jonathan, I hope this letter finds you well and that life at Bastion's Keep is not too difficult. Arthur is growing up to be just like his father. I'm happy to hear you'll be back in time for his birthday, and I'll be praying every night for your safe return.

~Brielle

91. FALL OF THE BARBARIANS

Part I

"I have been fortunate enough to learn much of the barbarians' complicated history in my time. Yet the origins of these large, mighty warriors are hazy at best. Legend holds that they are the offspring of Bul-Kathos, an ancient who embodied their ideals of strength, bravery. and courage."

~Deckard Cain

Part II

"The Childen of Bul-Kathos settled in the Northern Steppes, an area that is now known as the Dreadlands. Theirs was primarily a nomadic and tribal culture, though they had a few permanent settlements such as Sescheron and Harrogath. A group of revered former warriors known as the elder council ruled the barbarians."

~Deckard Cain

Part III

"The barbarians have always defended their lands in the north from trespassers. They believe that it is their sacred charge to guard Mount Arreat and the Worldstone within it from the outside world. Unfortunately, their battle prowess and tenacity have been misinterpreted as bloodthirst and territorial savagery by soldiers in Westmarch."

~Deckard Cain

Part IV

"Twenty years ago, Baal was loosed upon the world. He besieged the barbarian capital of Sescheron and used treachery to access the Worldstone Chamber, circumventing the three ancient guardians Talic, Madawc, and Korlic. In the end, he succeeded in corrupting the great artifact. Though Baal was slain by heroes, his damage was irreversible."

~Deckard Cain

Part V

"The Archangel Tyrael shattered the corrupted Worldstone to prevent the demons from using it. But the impact of the explosion destroyed Mount Arreat, leaving a massive crater in its wake. With nothing to protect, the barbarians grew aimless and divided. Now they are scattered through the north among the ruins of their long history."

~Deckard Cain

92. Ghom's Log

The human prisoners are panicking now? They must have noticed that fresh meat only comes after one of their number is dragged away, screaming... This will not hold. Slaughter the ones who starve themselves and feed them to their hungry friends. When those ones are fully stuffed... I will be ready to dine.

93. Journal of Hansen Haile, Captain

Day 9: Young commander Calderos believes that the demonic scourge will flee before a bloody show of righteous force. He intends to lead a charge from our fortifications tomorrow. Calderos can commit suicide by stupidity if he wants, but I'll be damned if I send my lads with him.

94. Leah's Keep Journal

Part XIII

We've reached Bastion's Keep, but holding the Black Soulstone together takes up all of my time now. Sometimes I think of the wounded soldiers and their families outside... but then my concentration fails and the spells weaken. I must stay focused and trust my friend to save the keep and its people.

Part XIV

The days are hard. If it weren't for my mother standing beside me, I don't know what I'd do. She even watches the stone for a few hours each night so I can rest. Sometimes I dream I'm in New Tristram with Uncle Deckard again, and... it's hard to wake up after that.

Part XV

Adria tells me that our friend has beaten back Azmodan's armies and the keep is safe now. I... I almost can't believe it. The essences within the soulstone grow angrier — fiercer. They're fighting against me every moment now, and their darkness creeps around the edges of my mind... I must remain strong.

Part XVI

I thought I was going to die when I saw the demons' rage escape from the soulstone. Tyrael and my friend fought them, but I couldn't help. It was like I was watching them through a haze. What is the soulstone doing to me? Azmodan must die soon... Then I will be myself again.

95. Morgan's Journal

Part I

Transferring to Bastion's Keep is as dull as I imagined. The soldiers spend most of their time gambling. I guess this is what I should expect from this hollowed-out rock, a shadow of its former glory. Still, I am here to provide for Anna. I hope she is well.

~Guard Morgan

Part II

The captain looked grim today. A messenger came in the middle of the night. They know something they aren't telling us. Maybe coming here was a bigger mistake than I thought...

~Guard Morgan

Part III

The demons came at night, silent as death; the night watch was overrun in moments. Since then it's been an endless massacre. Those creatures... they're straight out of a nightmare. I don't think I'll be going home after all. I'm sorry, Anna...

~Guard Morgan

96. Orders from Azmodan

Part I

Minions, Bastion's Keep has nearly fallen. Many of you have already gorged yourselves on blood and manflesh, but do not let your feasting delay you. I would have the keep and its commander in my possession before the next dawn. The rest of this world will fall soon after.

Part II

Minions, the imbecile who slew my brother, Belial, now means to aid the keep's beleaguered soldiers. He/She brings a girl with her who could undo us all. But I am not Belial; he was weak and cowered behind his disguises. Of course they failed him! We will seize our victory through bloodshed.

Part III

Minions, the men actually think that they can hide behind their paltry little walls! But they have only had a glimpse of the full host of Hell. We will see them drown in our tide of sin! The girl is still weak, and their "hero" will not expect us to attack from below. Send in the ravening beast.

Part IV

Minions, my brothers grow impatient within the soulstone. Yes, I can hear them even down here. Their voices are so pitiful and small that they almost amuse me. Yet they are my prize, not the Nephalem's...or the girl's, for that matter. This is not her time. This... is the Age of Sin.

Part V

Minions, there is nothing I loathe more than failure. You know this well, but if any of you need a further lesson, I will have you delivered into the Circle of Wrath with great haste. The enemy is strong, but she cannot pass the demon gate. Secure it, or your lives will be forfeit.

Part VI

Maiden of Lust! I have need of your... ample services. Drag yourself out of whatever carnal corner of the Burning Hells you lounge in, and bring your daughters with you. Be wary — the enemy has proven to be both cunning and strong. But the mortals have always been easy prey for you, have they not?

97. The History of Bastion's Keep

"Many centuries ago, King Korsikk built Bastion's Keep to "pen the barbarian threat" in the north. After years of military disasters, the frustrated king led a large army out of the fortress and into the north to conquer the barbarians once and for all. Not one of them came back."

~Deckard Cain

ACT IV

98. ARCHANGEL AURIEL, THE ASPECT OF HOPE

It is through the archangel Auriel that the power of hope flows into the fabric of creation. her eternal light illuminates even the darkest souls. With Malthael's departure, it falls to Auriel to hold the Angiris Council together. Should her light ever fade, all Heaven would fall to despair.

~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

99. ARCHANGEL IMPERIUS, THE ASPECT OF VALOR

Imperius, the archangel of Valor, is the greatest warrior in all of creation. He revels in war and combat and has led the hosts of Heaven to innumerable victories. With Malthael's absence, it is Imperius who now rules over the Angiris Council, seeking always to defend the High Heavens from any foe.

~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

100. ARCHANGEL ITHERAEL, THE ASPECT OF FATE

Knowledge of the future grants power over the present. For this reason, Itherael, the archangel of Fate, is a vital member of the Council. He alone possesses the ability to decipher the threads of destiny woven in the celestial Scroll of Fate. His boundless sight grants him perspective others cannot fully comprehend. ~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

101. Archangel Malthael, the Aspect of Wisdom

Much uncertainty surrounds the archangel Malthael. Once the calm guiding hand of wisdom, he was lost to us the moment the Worldstone disappeared. Unable to fathom that catastrophic event, he abandoned Heaven. His departure created a colossal fracture within the council, one that, to this day, remains unrepaired.

~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

102. Archangel Tyrael, the Aspect of Justice

Tyrael, the archangel of Justice, is a being of balance and integrity. His compassion for mankind has compromised his standing within the Angiris Council. He alone recognizes the nephalem's capacity to transcend their divided heritage and become the true champions of creation.

~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

103. Burial Wishes

If you are reading this, my husband and I are both gone. We would like to be buried side by side, preferably in a sunny spot. Oh, and please don't bury my husband's sword with us. He won't need it anymore

~Marta

104. Izual's Descent

The angel Izual was once Tyrael's lieutenant, but he was captured by the enemy after an ill-advised assault upon the Hellforge. Izual surrendered to demonic corruption and revealed the secrets of the soulstones to the Prime Evils. Tyrael claimed that Izual was slain years ago, but his replacement has never emerged from the Crystal Arch...

~Archangel Itherael

105. The Angiris Council

The Angiris Council is comprised of the five archangels who hold dominion over the High Heavens. They determine the laws by which all angels must abide. Each of them embodies a pure aspect of creation: valor, justice, hope, fate and wisdom.

~Selathiel, Angiris Scribe

106. The Creation of Sanctuary

Part I

I knew Inarius long ago - when he was still among the angels. But he grew weary of battling the demons after a time, and he began to secretly conspire with demons in order to forge a peace. The demoness Lilith became his greatest ally in the Hells, and many other demons and angels joined his cause.

~Archangel Auriel

Part II

After he gained a following, Inarius stole the sacred Worldstone and used it to create and conceal a world he called Sanctuary. Demons and angels alike fled there, and some of them - including Inarius and Lilith - fell in love. Many of these unions resulted in children. They were called the nephalem.

~Archangel Auriel

Part III

Inarius was alarmed when he realized that the nephalem had the potential to surpass both angels and demons in power. He wished to limit their abilities, but Lilith demanded that they become her army. Their escalating conflict led to Sanctuary's discovery by the demon lords and the Angiris Council.

~Archangel Auriel

Part IV

In the end, Lilith was banished and Inarius was given over to the demons, who have tortured him in the Hells ever since. Most of Inarius's followers were killed; those who remained shared an even darker fate. Despite the tragedy, I believe the nephalem may yet play a part in resolving the Eternal Conflict.

~Archangel Auriel

107. The Destiny of the Nephalem

Part I

My scroll has shown me many things: beginnings, ends, and the endless chains of circumstance that bind them. I see no sunrise without seeing its sunset, no budding flower without its wilted ruin, no event without its appropriate and inevitable consequence. But there is one thing I cannot see: the nephalem.

~Archangel Itherael

Part II

Angels and demons are bound to their natures. Demons are given to chaos and deceit; angels to truth and order. That much is known. Some angels, like Inarius and Izual, have fallen, but the seed of goodness remains within them like a fading star in the lonely night. The nephalem alone have choice.

~Archangel Itherael

Part III

I know nothing of nephalem. My duties leave me no time to watch them, and I have no desire to follow Tyrael on his troubled path. But if the threads of fate should bring them here, how enlightening it would be! These creatures dwell outside the order... They cannot fathom the freedom they possess.

~Archangel Itherael

ACT V

108. ADRIA'S NOTE

Diablo will return. I have done what I can to ensure it. He always finds a way. In your heart of hearts, you know this.

109. ADRIA'S JOURNAL

Part I

The first time I saw a witch, she burned. Father took me to the town square to see it. "Look," he said. "That is the face of evil." But she looked like any other woman, and burned like anything else. Then the flames engulfed her, her eyes found mine, and she laughed.

Part II

My father could never understand. He was born into privilege and wealth, and he spent every moment of his life trying to protect it. I was his flesh and blood, but he cared more about the names in books and the faces of the paintings on the walls than his living daughter.

Part III

Do you know what fear is? The fear of who you are, the fear of what your own blood would do if they knew what you were. No, you could never understand it. People look to you as a savior. Have you ever thought about the lives you've taken? They were fathers, lovers... daughters.

Part IV

They asked me what I see when I look into the fire. I see a burning man. I see a burning witch. I see terror and a hunger that will consume everything. What hope do the works of men have against such all-consuming hunger? I gave myself to the flames.

Part V

My father burned. He screamed as the flames consumed him, and the smell was...sickly sweet. He had found me -- for once in his life, he had noticed me -- and when he saw that the flames did not touch me, he breathed one word. It was his last.

Part VI

"Witch," they called me. But I turned it against them. When their daughter had a child that needed to disappear, when there was a sickness that none of the healers could cure, who was it they pleaded with? When they needed me, the morality they flaunted in the daylight disappeared. As it always does.

Part VII

The first time I heard him, his voice pierced my skull. It reminded me of the cold and haughty sound of my father, but it was more, a crush of thousands of voices. When I heard him, I saw the flames, and I knew fear.

Part VIII

It was a man who came to my bed that night, but when I looked into his eyes, I saw the other, though even he did not know at the time. I did not hear the man's voice, no. I heard the other, the one that has been with me for all these years. I gave myself to him.

Part IX

Leah was never my daughter. She was Diablo's daughter in truth. I felt blessed to have given the product of my body to my master. He had no interest in me, but in the product of my womb, he found life again. I never flinched when I knew her purpose. Daughters are a cheap thing.

II⌀. CULTIST MISSIVE

"He bade us find the favored children of Heaven and Hell and drain their blood. The children are few, and their strength is great. We take them unawares — unarmed or asleep — and open their veins. The blood flows into the temple, and our master smiles."

III. DESERTER'S JOURNAL

Part I

We are fighting a battle that was lost before it had even begun. To follow the Black King into a war against Westmarch was folly of the highest order. Each day only brings us closer to complete and utter defeat, but our commanders refuse to surrender.

Part II

It is decided. We will flee this doomed war. I had hoped to find solace in this decision, but it brings only more uncertainty. We will never see our homes again, and our names will be dishonored. But what choice do we have? Certain death in the service of a madman?

Part III

We found what was left of Raston yesterday. The wretched creatures of the bog seized us without warning. We are being punished by the gods. I would laugh if I had the energy. We fled the war to save ourselves, but it seems death already knew our names.

Part IV

This cave has killed even more of us than the bog we sought to escape. We must leave at once. But to where? The only choice left to us is: where to die?

Part V

We are men without a country, shamed and cursed for fleeing an unjust war. We should have stayed and died with our honor intact. Instead we are slaughtered like pigs by beasts that feed on our remains. Death on the battlefield would have been far better than the fate we have chosen.

112. Explorer's Log

Day 1. An inexplicable tide arose from nowhere, dashing our ship on the rocks, and now we are stranded. Could the old myths actually be true? Regardless, since our plan to study this infamous place was the talk of many, I am certain we'll be rescued before long. In the meantime, my research awaits.

Day 6. It is odd — I feel the island's malevolence weighing upon me, and hear screams on the wind—but no one has lived here for millennia. We've only been here days, but my crew has the look of men who have been stranded for months. I find myself contemplating the impossible: is this island truly evil, or am I going mad?

Day 23. Our lot is an unfortunate one. Some of us have been lost to madness, some have disappeared, and some have dropped dead for no apparent reason. And who or what is the crazed hermit with his bizarre rituals? When he attacked Smythe I was forced to kill him, yet I saw him this morning, alive. Terrifying.

Day... day... I no longer know what day it is. I am forced to admit that our plan was ill conceived at best. Being the last survivor, it falls to me to rid this world of that madman if it's the last thing I do. I have lost count of how many times I have already killed him; I can only pray that this time it takes.

113. Fharzula

Awaken. Obey. Sacrifice.

114. Grand Maester's Journal

Man is a flawed being. Time and again, we have seen good men give in to temptation. Though it is painful, I have found only one answer: we must cleanse the minds of our recruits so they will never fall prey to the corruption of the demons, or the blind self-righteousness of the angels.

~Grand Maester

115. High Cleric's Journal

Part I

Rayeld has strayed. But I maintain hope, for there is no joy to be found that can compare to our worship. Very few grasp the transcendent relationship between the rituals and our goddess. I... I know my son has the true sight, and, one day, he will once again embrace our faith completely.

Part II

Rayeld's behavior is becoming more and more erratic. I think he actually believes our sacrifices cruel, but we are all simply instruments of Nereza in this life. I pray that he will come to understand how important they are, for the goddess must be fed or evil shall prevail. Perhaps tomorrow's ritual will open his eyes to the truth.

116. History of Kanai's Cube

Part I

The Cube was used by my Horadrim brothers in many of their most complex rituals. When its potential became clear, they began to fear its power, the fools. They hid it away, even from me, and created a less powerful implement, the Horadric Cube, which they used for many years.

Part II

I never stopped looking for Kanai's Cube. Finally, I learned that they had entrusted it to a secret society of Barbarians. The last of these, Kanai, died in Baal's invasion of Sescheron. His spirit guards it still, and he is unlikely to give it to me. But I know someone who can impress even the mighty Kanai.

117. Journal of Rayeld the Younger

Part I

I can barely contain myself. After so many years of studying, my time has finally come. Tomorrow I wield the sacrificial knife for the first time. I am certain the goddess Nereza will find me pure when she gazes into my soul and receives my offering.

Part II

Thank the goddess my father did not see. My hand shook, and I was sick to my stomach. During every other sacrifice I have witnessed, I only experienced the joy of the offering. But holding the knife, looking into their eyes as they die... for the first time, I doubt my faith.

Part III

My father knows, I can see it in his eyes. But now that I understand what our religion truly is, I cannot let it continue. If Nereza knows what is in my heart, then I am already damned, so I might as well do something worthwhile to earn it.

Part IV

As I approached the sacrifice, knife in hand, I saw her pleading eyes. Until that moment, I was unsure whether I could really do it. With a clear conscience, I turned the blade on my father and freed the girl, who I now know as Sara. Fortunately, the worshippers were too stunned to stop our escape.

Part V

Nereza was no goddess, though I can't say what she was. She had human eyes, but her visage was more that of some hideous demon. And when I killed her, I felt that evil flow through me into the very island itself. Then, it... it took Sara.

118. Last of the Barbarians

Part I

Baal has invaded Sescheron, but we will fight until we are no more. For we are all that stands between him and our sacred Mountain — and I swear by the blood of Bul-Kathos, hell will pay dearly for each of our deaths.

Part II

Chief Elder Kanai was the best of us. He could have been the next Immortal King. None have come close to bringing the tribes together since Worusk, but Kanai could have been the one to change that with his indomitable spirit. Though as strong as three warriors, his true strength lay in his compassion.

Part III

We showed Baal and his army what it meant to fight true warriors, but when Kanai was killed it froze the spirits of our bloodied ranks. That was when the battle was lost, for he was truly our king.

Part IV

Dren, the last of our seers, prophesied the darkness would soon pass. He was wrong. Mount Arreat exploded, and took our souls with it. Many of our dwindling number were lost that day to madness and worse. They are the Unclean.

Part V

The years wear on us all. Only a few still live, but we have made a good account of ourselves, killing all but the most vicious of the flesh eaters. To think they were once our kin... as long as even one of them still lives we are all shamed.

119. Lord Kertis's Journal

"I curse you, Saul! You sold me that piece of waterlogged land to build my castle on?! Well, I will have the last laugh, you dog! I will build my castle here, and it will be the grandest castle ever! Do you hear me, Saul? Ever!"

~Lord Kertis

120. Maddening Questions

I found more of the enigmatic portals. They are hidden yet everywhere. They call to me, but to set foot into them is to be drawn deeper into the mystery of the dungeons that lie beyond. I cannot think of anything else. I should find a way to close the portals, if only to save me from myself.

121. Malthael's Plan

Malthael is fundamentally altering the Black Soulstone. It will now pull in all the demonic essence from whatever plane of existence it finds itself in. But mankind is born of angel and demon alike. Every mortal save myself has demonic essence as an intrinsic part of their being. Losing that will rip their body and soul apart.

~Archangel Tyrael

122. Melaina's Memory

We trained believing that we would fight together, but Eirena was the one who was chosen, and we were the ones who must sacrifice to support her. Why her and not me? A selfish question, for I know that if she was asked, she would say yes. So I did.

~Melaina the Enchantress

123. Miser's Will

To my sniveling offspring: if you are reading this, then I am dead and you have come to claim my fortune. Well, you still can't have it! I have set traps to stop you from even trying. So, enjoy the rest of your poor, miserable, and cowardly lives.

~Gozek

124. Mysterious Journal

Part I

Everything has changed. First Belial was thwarted in Caldeum — then Azmodan in Arreat Crater. Their deaths shook the Seven Hells, but they were merely the harbinger for the return of Diablo as the Prime Evil. Though his power was unmatched, he was defeated... and the Angel of Death followed. Who could have done this?

Part II

The rumors have traveled far, even to my lands. Humanity is regaining its power, and the nephalem are reborn... People say they have defeated Diablo and Malthael, and secured peace on Sanctuary. My brothers and sisters did not believe it... No mortal could do so much. But I would know more...

Part III

I was never the strongest of my kin, but I am the most relentless. I will find these heroes, even if it means scouring every corner of these miserable lands. It is clear the nephalem are drawn to danger, and if nothing else, that is what will bring us together.

Part IV

I must make the proper arrangements before we meet. Everything shall be in order for my exalted guests. They are used to the company of angels and rulers, not my humble pleasures, but oh, the things they are missing. I will show them just how attentive a host can be.

Part V

My followers have done well. I was no match for those I seek, but through my new regimen, I have gained strength and power. To think it was this simple all along! Perhaps my dear little friends will see me and know they are inferior? That their blood is thin compared to the richness that now flows in my veins? Or we could slice each other open and see who is the victor...

125. NEVER ENDING QUESTIONS

I can see it now. My brothers and sisters will be drawn to these places of power, and I cannot stop it. I can only hope that some of them will prove more adept than I and see the patterns clearly before the call takes them. Perhaps they will even discover why these dungeons exist. For me it is too late. I feel the call, and I know I must heed it, regardless of the cost.

126. RAISSA'S MEMORY

The Prophet asked each of us in turn, before he cast the spell of binding. Our lives for hers. If we declined, we could leave without any thought of shame. We each heard the question and answered the only way we could. Our cause was too important to not make that sacrifice.

~Raissa the Enchantress

127. REVIVAL

The nephalem, that fool, actually killed me. Of course this was not my first time stepping through that door, and I imagine it won't be my last. Fortunately, I am well prepared. Some would say that animating a constructed body with preserved memories is not truly coming back to life. I say those fools don't understand the sheer wonder of being Zoltun Kulle.

128. Sybil's Memory

The Prophet said I would not dream... but I did. At first, they were dreams of color, unsettling, and then I began to hear voices. They called for me, over and over, and then I woke.

~Sybil the Enchantress

129. Testament of My Failure

Part I

Everyone is calling me a hero now. If they only knew. No hero does the things that I have, and for what? They think that I have freed them, but I have damned us all.

Part II

What I am about to do will torment me forever. But I have no choice. It is my fault, therefore I must set it right and do whatever it takes to keep this evil from spreading and poisoning the whole world.

130. The Crusaders

Part I

In the eastern kingdom of Kehjistan, I heard rumors of Zakarum warriors called crusaders. While the natives were most reticent, I was able to deduce that this order was founded two hundred years ago, just as Rakkis took his army of paladins west. But these crusaders went east on a very different mission.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part II

My studies indicate that a high level cleric of the Zakarum named Akkhan began to sense the corruption that was eating away at the heart of his faith. He knew this corruption would eventually destroy his beloved church and that he must take action. After much prayer, Akkhan hit upon the idea of an order of crusaders.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part III

Akkhan gathered the most devout, driven and martial Zakarum adherents. He taught them to channel the power of Light, in the same way that the newly founded paladins were being trained. But these recruits, these crusaders, were given insight into the primal powers of Zakarum, in a way no paladin ever was.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part IV

When the crusaders had learned all they could, Akkhan sent them out into the world, seeking a way to cleanse the corruption that coiled at the heart of the Zakarum faith. There was no clear goal for them to pursue, and some clerics claimed it was a fool's errand, that they could never succeed. But these crusaders would not be deterred.

~ Abd al-Hazir

Part V

The Crusaders swore an oath to dedicate their lives to the search. None believed that they would be the one to end the crusade by finding and cleansing the corruption. They believed the search enabled them, that the discipline of their life and journey was the true goal. The crusader was meant to find meaning in the quest itself.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part VI

Each and every crusader was a warrior of rare strength. They had mastered the power of Light, of weapon and shield, and of self. Each was sworn to live as a crusader and to die as

one. Two hundred years ago, they took their apprentices and set out into the eastern swamplands. They were never heard from again. Until now.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part VII

Rumors swirl that the crusaders have returned, and that they mean to go to the west. But who are these tall, blond warriors? They look nothing like the crusaders who set out from Travincal two hundred years ago, and those who inhabit the ruins of that ancient city suspect trickery!

~Abd al-Hazir

Part VIII

I recently met a returning crusader, and now I understand. Each crusader took an apprentice. When a crusader fell, his apprentice would take up his armor, his place in the order, and even his very name! When the first generation of crusaders fell, their own apprentices took up their identities. And so it has continued for two hundred years.

~Abd al-Hazir

Part IX

Of the original four hundred and twenty seven crusaders who disappeared into the east, three hundred and forty one return. Do they still seek the redemption of their faith? How will they react to the destruction of the city that birthed their crusade? Will they continue west to the lands of Westmarch? What does their return portend?

~Abd al-Hazir

131. THE DISCOVERY OF SANCTUARY

Mephisto

Cursed am I to lead an army of the blind. They do not perceive that the angels are fleeing this realm, and the ones they find are merely trapped or lost. A great change is upon us. Withdraw from the fields, my brothers. Some battles can only be won with words.

Baal

Enough of your idle speculation, Mephisto! I breached the fortress and saw it firsthand. The Worldstone is gone! The angels I killed knew nothing about it. But since you are so perceptive, maybe you remember who else has been missing: Lilith. We must find her, rip her limb from limb, take the Worldstone back!

Diablo

You are all deceived, my brothers. A new age has already begun. Can you not sense them? Ugly creatures, born in shadow, they feel terror, hatred, and the desire to destroy. Yes... but they are not ours yet. But they will open their world to us very soon. An invitation we cannot refuse.

132. The Grand Master's Proclamation

The day of reckoning is at hand. We will rise from the ashes of Westmarch and lead mankind into the Light! We shall have recruits by the thousands -- every citizen will be another templar added to the cause. Once cleansed by the inquisitors, they will become an unstoppable force!

133. The Great Weapon

The Great Weapon was created in response to a siege on the Pandemonium Fortress by Kurekas, a demon lord who rode a monstrous siege beast. At great cost to ourselves, we channeled much energy into the Great Weapon, and succeeded in bringing down Kurekas and his mount. Upon his death, the demon was drawn inexplicably into the weapon, and it has been attacking us ever since.

~Archangel Itherael

134. The History of Pandemonium

Part I

"Pandemonium is the alpha and the omega of the Eternal Conflict. It lies at the center of all things, linking between the realms of Heaven and Hell. Long ago, when the angels were young, the aspect of Wisdom found the Eye of Anu here. He named it the Worldstone and all of Heaven swore to protect it."

Part II

"Pandemonium was destined to be our battlefield. It was formed in the chaos of the last struggle between the diamond warrior Anu and the Dragon, Tathamet. Now, eons of war have scarred every patch of ground. The cycle of victory and defeat is the foundation of our existence, and the essence of the Eternal Conflict."

Part III

"As war raged through Pandemonium, the Aspect of Justice called for a fortress to be raised around the Worldstone. We built a shining citadel, but in time, it fell to the demons. It has since changed hands countless times, becoming a patchwork of angelic and demonic expression."

Part IV

"The Pandemonium Fortress housed the Worldstone for many years... until the angel Inarius and the demon Lilith stole it away. With its loss, there was nothing left to fight for, and the fortress has been abandoned since. Our time in this land has drawn to an end for now."

135. THE HISTORY OF WESTMARCH

Part I

Westmarch originally grew from the efforts of the great general Rakkis to spread his religion beyond the realms of the east. Seized by the superstitions of the Zakarum faith, he drove his paladins relentlessly across the barbaric western lands, subduing the uncivilized tribes he found there. Ulimately, he became king of them all.

Part II

Despite his superstitious views, Rakkis ruled as a just and fair king who was much loved by his people. He was succeeded by his son Korsikk who attempted to eradicate the barbarian tribes of the north. The line of Rakkis was broken when Korsikk's son, Korelan, died with no heirs.

Part III

After Korelan's death, the crown passed to Justinian I through a somewhat convoluted interpretation of Zakarum scripture. Thus began the Justinian dynasty. Seen as usurpers by many, the Justinians suffered nearly constant challenges to their rule. Finally, during the reign of Justinian III, a full-fledged insurrection broke out in the outlying region of Cartolus.

Part IV

The Cartolus Insurrection was led by a woman known only as Tyrra, who claimed to be descended from the Sons of Rakkis. This uprising was immediately seen as a war of the common man against the nobles and their Zakarum strictures. During the very height of the conflict, Tyrra seized control of Westmarch and proclaimed herself empress.

Part V

Tyrra's newly established rule over Westmarch did nothing to quell the civil war, which continued until she was driven mad and eventually killed by the plague. Cornelius, grandson of Justinian III and slave to the Zakarurn faith, used this opening to crush the rebels once and for all and become the new king.

Part VI

The Zakarum Church always held an unhealthy sway in Westmarch, even after the ascension of rulers more interested in power than religion. When the true nature of the faith was finally exposed, however, it completely eroded any influence the church had over civil affairs. And rightly so, I might add.

Part VII

Westmarch is currently ruled by Justinian IV. Originally thought to be a callow youth, Justinian came into his own in the years following his ascension to the throne. Rumors still abound about demonic activity surrounding his coronation, but I believe those are simply the product of overactive imaginations fueled by the ever-prevalent myths of the Zakarum.

Item flavour text

Countess Julia attempted to put down the Cartolus Insurrection with her own personal guard, in an attempt to impress Justinian III. The effort failed miserably, as her guard was slaughtered and the uprising spread. Only the countess's enchanted cameo enabled her to survive this folly. It did not save her life, however, as King Justinian was so displeased, he had her tortured and then executed.

136. THE KING'S JOURNAL

Part I

I am so weary. Why did you have to die, brother? I was never meant to be king. The nobles threaten revolt to bend me to their will. They will abandon me if I don't keep the peasants in their place. My position is hopeless.

Part II

I have come to realize my personal feelings are of no consequence. My people are dying, and they need their king. Our resistance starts today - and Lord Wynton, of all people, has provided the means. These reapers shall not have Westmarch! I swear my life on it!

137. The King's Note to Lord Wynton

Lord Wynton, we are thrilled that you have located a surviving regiment of soldiers. With this new force, we can turn the tide and save our city. Your disagreements with the crown are well known, but we are glad you can put them aside in this dangerous time. Long live Westmarch!"

138. The Horrible Secret

The angels and their monsters are killing everyone! What will they do to me when they find out what I truly am? My mother and the demon attack she survived. It's ... it's all too horrible to contemplate.

139. The Last of the Ancients

When I look upon our weakened offspring, I am filled with rage. Killing them is a mercy, but one I have been unable to extend to myself. I must seek another to do what I cannot, before the endless days drive me to madness.

~Kalmor

140. The Lost Warrior

Something now inhabits the fortress. I am certain of it. Long have I gazed upon its scarred facade, dreaming of the safe haven its walls offer. But it has changed. The vacant terraces have turned cold. I am so desperate to escape the demons, but whatever is in the fortress may be worse...

~Lost Angel

141. THE PATH OF WISDOM

Part I

"I heard a sound, and did not know what it was. I sought wisdom in the chalice, but there was none. The sounds called to me, and I knew them... human souls. But where?"

Part II

"I brought myself to Sanctuary, where humans dwell. But the souls did not call me from that place. I searched the breadth of creation, always following the sound. Always the sound. And then, I understood – Pandemonium, where the Worldstone once rested..."

Part III

"The souls swirl and writhe. I now know the truth of mortals. All paths lead to death. Whatever their struggles, whatever their triumphs, they die. That is wisdom."

Part IV

"The souls of man show their potential for greatness. They can stand for good like any angel in Heaven. Or they can enact evil worthy of the lowest demon of Hell. The power of such a choice should not rest in the hearts of beings who are here for an instant, then flare and die."

Part V

"The humans cannot be trusted. They are born of angel and demon, but demons pervert whatever they touch. The humans are corrupt, and are not worthy of the choice between good and evil. Angels and demons do not choose, as it should be."

Part VI

"A nephalem trapped the Prime Evil in the Black Soulstone. This is the perfect moment to end the Eternal Conflict. The demons are easy prey – but the humans must be eliminated before they grow too strong. The soulstone is the perfect weapon. The Eternal Conflict will end.

142. The Plague Tunnels

Repository of Bones, commonly called the Plague Tunnels, were originally used to bury Westmarch's indigent. However, when the Great Pestilence struck, the city decided the tunnels would serve just as well for plague victims, lest Westmarch become overwhelmed by the ever-increasing piles of the dead.

~Abd al-Hazir

143. The Ravings of a Deranged Mind

I can hear them. The voices speak to me again! What? Death is coming? But I can't die! I can't! I am too important to have my life just thrown away. Please, tell me how I can avoid my fate. You want me to do what? Must I? Oh yes, yes, I will! I swear it. I will do anything.

~Hamish Bode

144. The Souls of Westmarch

We must do everything in our power to slow the nephalem down so that the collection of souls is not interrupted. It is the key to Malthael's victory.

145. The Testament of Inarius

Part I

They call me a hero. I slew demons beyond count. I won battle and broke sieges, but it availed me nothing. I know that this war can have no victor, only an eternity of revenge, pride, and hatred. Tyrael does not understand. He cannot see beyond the glory of battle. In time, he may, but that day is not yet here.

Part II

There must be others who seek a way out of the endless strife. Angels and demons who feel enslaved by our fate. I cannot be unique in all of creation. I know my path: I will find those disillusioned of the war, and lead them.

Part III

I was struck down in the third charge. I lay upon the ground only to wake in chains. I did not know that demons took prisoners. I babbled like a fool about my dreams of escaping this war. My captor freed me and said that we would meet again. Her name was Lilith, daughter of Mephisto.

Part IV

Lilith is me, but of fire and flame. I could never have felt this way about a demon while I was mired in the endless war. The strain holds us prisoner to what we have been told to believe. She and I have made plans. We will bring others to our cause, and together, we will escape.

Part V

Those who follow us are strong in purpose and conviction, but we are only few. Yet, if we can obtain the power of the Worldstone, it will be enough. We will scale the Windshear slope, steal into the heart of the fortress, and be gone before anyone notices the stone's disappearance.

Part VI

Can I truly love a demon? When I gave the Worldstone to Lilith, I knew I had been right to seek her all along. We have created a new world. We can live here in peace, away from war. I have named this world Sanctuary.

Part VII

When I see Lilith sleeping at my side, I'm filled with dark thoughts. My sins are real, and I will surely pay for them. We live in peace for now, but it cannot last. They will come for me. But what of my great deeds? When I'm in torment, who will celebrate those? Who will remember Inarius?

146. The Testament of Rakkis

Part I

I have uncovered an obscure and ancient tome in whose pages is recorded an impossible tale: the secret history of a race called the nephalem — gods by another name — and their ruined civilization in the west. If this is true, how could all signs of these nephalem be lost but for the record in this single tome?

Part II

The nephalem were not gods but our own ancestors, gifted with long life, magic, and abilities far beyond ours. Yet they were still men. I wonder if these pages hold the key to unlock their powers once again?

Part III

I will bring the Light of Zakarum to the heathens. Here in the east, the power of Zakarum wanes, but in the west, it will rise, stronger and greater than ever. Yet I have another purpose. The lost nephalem city of Corvus lies in the west. I will find it.

Part IV

We founded a settlement near the western sea. It will grow to be a great city in time. Now that my people are settled, I can begin my own search for the ruins of the nephalem city Corvus. The tome implied that it was near this very region.

Part V

We have begun searching the marsh for the ruins of Corvus. This stinking, festering swamp is punctuated by worn blocks of stone. Perhaps these ancient sentinels are all that remain of the proud nephalem city? No, there is more to be found, I know it.

Part VI

Last night, I found the ruined nephalem city. When I stepped into the buried catacombs, I felt a stirring in my blood. And then a wondrous thing: a dim light began to glow all around me, not cast by any torch. It was as though the very stones acknowledged my presence.

Part VII

The nephalem had such a strong connection to the Light that it granted them powers far beyond our own. But I believe that, through the Light, they can be reborn in us. Thus, I have consecrated Westmarch, a shining beacon in the west. I have taken for my sigil the wolf of Corvus and proclaimed myself king.

Part VIII

A decade later, the power of the nephalem still escapes me. Something long ago stole it from them, and keeps it hidden, even today. I have found mention of an artifact called Worldstone, hidden in the Barbarian lands. Now that my son is born, I have rallied my banners to ride to war against them.

Part IX

Years on, the barbarians remain unconquered and I am a man grown old and frail. My life has seen the founding of Westmarch and the discovery of the nephalem ruins, but still the deeper secrets elude me. I leave the task to my son, in whose blood shall carry forth the line of nephalem kings.

147. The Writings of Lilith

Part I

My father is content to fight the same battles and the same foes while everything turns to ashes. Though his victories might last a day, or a year, or a hundred years, the war will never be won so long as he and his brothers lead. There is an end to it, but fools like my father are too blind to see it.

Part II

I took a prisoner in the battle, an angel whose light was dimming. I brought him to my lair for my amusement. But he surprised me. My touch seemed to breathe life into him. He raved like a madman about how he wished to escape the war. Perhaps I have found someone I can use.

Part III

The angel I captured, Inarius, is in love with me. I can feel the intensity of his desire. I told him that we must liberate the Worldstone, and then we can be together. We will create something never imagined by those mired in the Eternal Conflict. A new world.

Part IV

Inarius and I stole the Worldstone, and now we have a group of renegades to follow us. I have created a new world where we can live in peace. A place of infinite possibilities. Inarius believes that escape is enough. In time, I will show him that even victory is possible. But first, I will give him children.

~Lilith

148. They never listen

They never listen. The small minds that surround me ignore my greatness — and then kill me! First the Horadrim, those plodding fools. Then the nephalem! Imagine if that one had listened? We would have angels and demons for servants. We'd be riding them like horses. Perhaps I am being unkind. It's not that their minds are so small, it's just that mine is so large.

149. Urzael's Journal

Part I

After years of my pleading, the Angiris Council has finally agreed to send me in search of Malthael. I will not fail in this, as my master's presence is sorely needed in the High Heavens. Owing to Malthael's growing fascination with the humans, Tyrael has suggested I begin my search on Sanctuary

Part II

I did not find Malthael on Sanctuary. But I did find humans, far too many of them. They murder and cheat one another while allowing their brothers to starve. If their true power is ever released we are all doomed. They have a choice between good and evil, and they overwhelmingly choose evil.

Part III

I grew disgusted by humanity during my time on Sanctuary. When at last I found Malthael, I was not surprised to learn that he felt the same way. We will cleanse creation of the scourge that is humankind, and when we are finished, the tragic mistake of Inarius will be gone.

150. Urzael's Trap

"Nephalem, I knew the greed that infects your kind would not let you pass this chest by. And now, you shall suffer for it."

151. Vidian, Lord of Envy

"Vidian was always an...unusual demon. I only beheld him once, as he would seldom obey the will of his master, Azmodan. But on that occasion, he was only too ready to bring disorder to the angelic host. When he first appeared, we did not know of his insidious threat, and focused our attacks on his mightier brethren. It did not take long before the angels themselves were beginning to turn on each other, and question their leaders. By the time we figured out what had happened, the battle was lost, and it was too late."

152. YET MORE QUESTIONS

The portals defied my attempts to shut them, but that no longer matters. There is something about these dungeons, a pattern that I can't quite see. But I feel it. Constantly. I am continually rebuffed in my attempts to best them, but it is only a matter of time. And these messages. Who or what is the Alliance of the Dying Sun? What is their purpose?

POEMS

THE INITIATE

THE INITIATE (PART I)

Which way is the right path, as I stand upon
this chaotic crossroad of hate...
How many ways are there to roam
on this dark and damned road of Fate...
"There are many ways, my son,
to find where the souls of Demons remain...
But it takes only one second of despair and of doubt
until at last, your soul, they will gain...
Inherit these lands, these things, these dreams
that are yours, forever, to adore...
For there is no life, in the depths of chaos, my son,
for you to explore..."

THE ADEPT (PART 2)

I have walked the paths; the shadowed roads

that led to terror's breast.

I have plumbed the depths of Hatred's womb,

and scaled Destruction's crest.

For every secret left unveiled, for every power learned,

I'd sell the remnants of my soul, regardless how it burned.

And still I sought a higher wisdom few could have attained.

'Though I found it, it would leave me - broken, damned and drained.

For now I find this power gained is more unto a curse.

My spirit burns with every spell and each irreverent verse.

Despite this strength and knowledge earned, I have paid a heavy toll,

Never should've traded power for my own immortal soul."

LONG ROAD'S END

What fires burn within my heart and force me to contend

With the perils that await me at this tragic journey's end?

I have walked the roads that lead to Hell, I have challenged all but Fate.

I have fought and bled and carried on just to reach this final gate.

And now the task before me looms, this dire deed undone;

I shall make my stand against the Three until the battle's won.

What fear or wound would ever still this last defiant cry,

As I stand against the Shadow 'neath the endless burning sky?